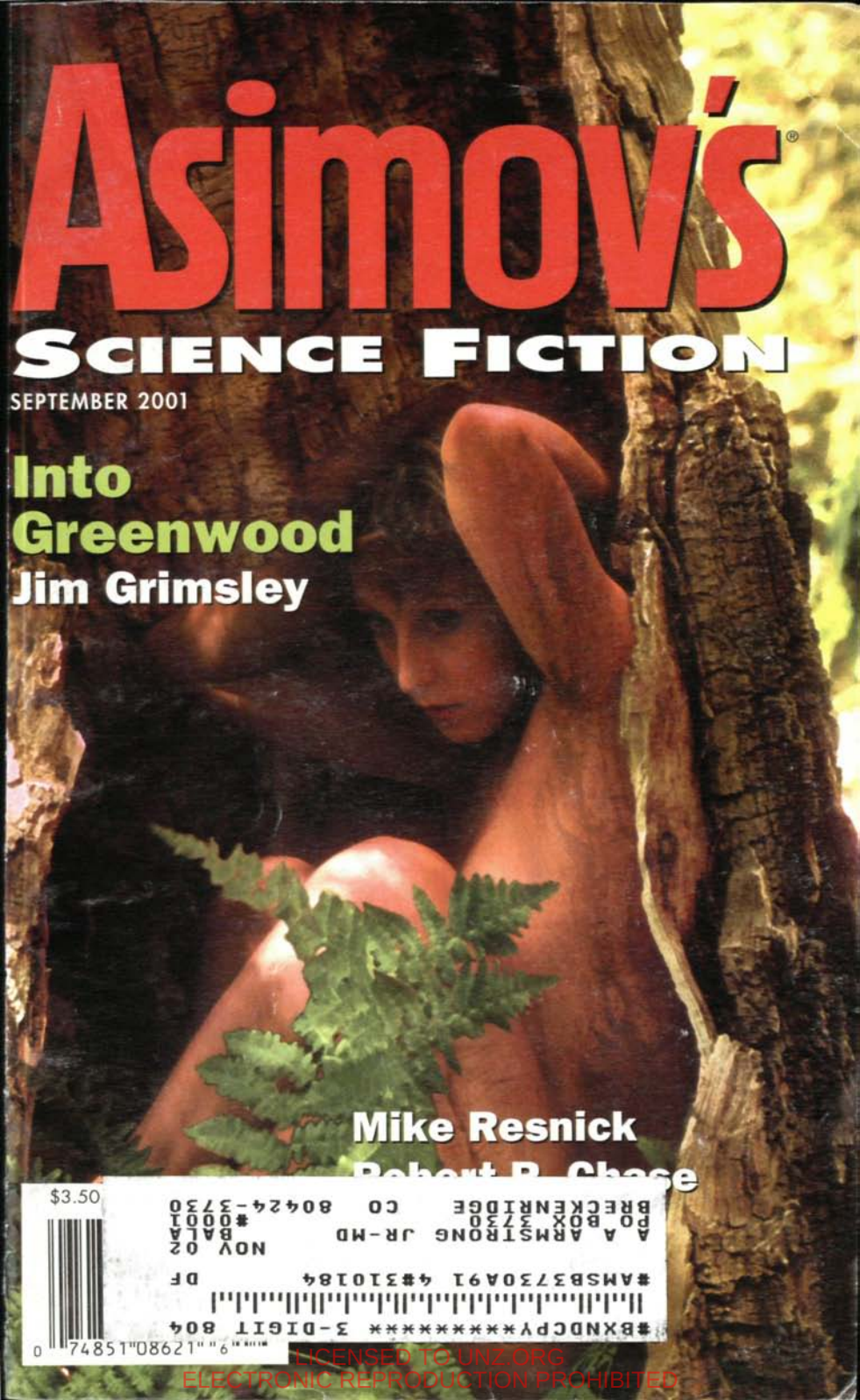

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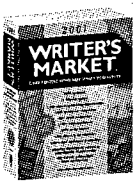

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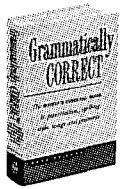

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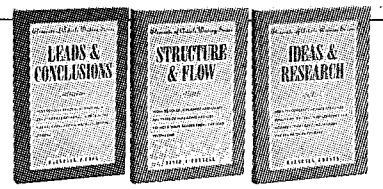

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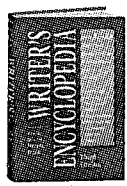

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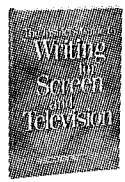

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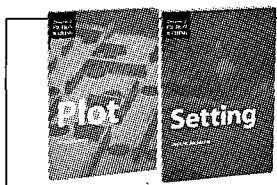

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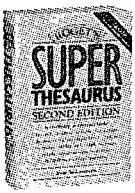

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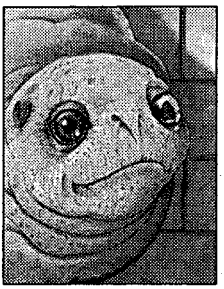

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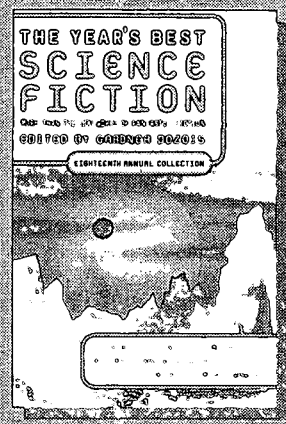

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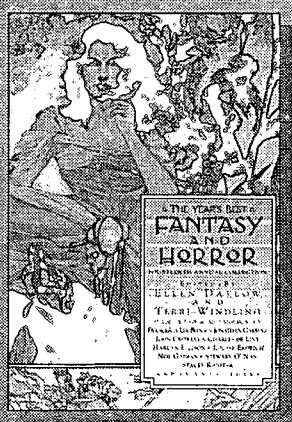

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE CASE OF THE PHOSPHORESCENT RABBIT

Thirty-odd years ago, in a novel called *To Live Again,* I wrote a scene set in an amusement park of the fairly near future where patrons of a shooting gallery get a chance to take potshots at living creatures specially created for the purpose by means of genetic engineering. If I may quote myself a bit:

> A flamboyant sign declared: WELCOME TO THE HOUSE OF HALF-LIFE.
>
> "What's this?" she asked. "More radioactive games?"
>
> "I have no idea. Shall we go in?"
>
> They entered. A fee of a dollar fissionable was extracted from each of them. Swiftly they discovered that the House of Half-Life, despite its name, did not traffic in neutrons and alpha particles; the half-life offered here was biological, hybrid creatures raised from fused cell nuclei. Behind an electrified barrier stunted beings shuffled around, while a pre-programmed speaker recited their identities. "Here we have mouse and cat, folks, one of the most popular hybrids. And this is dog and tiger, believe it if you can! Next you see snake and frog."
>
> The hybrid animals bore little resemblance to any of their supposed ancestors. They tended to be neutral, unspecialized in form, evolutionary prototypes lacking in clear characteristics. Most were less than two feet in length, moving about on small uncertain legs. The dog-tiger had patches of gray fur. The snake-frog was squat and glistening, with pulsating pouches of flesh. "Man and mouse, ladies and gentlemen, man and mouse!" came the disembodied voice. . . . "Infect them with the Sendai virus, blend the nuclei in a centrifuge, toss in a dash of nucleic acid, yes, yes, man and mouse!" A dozen distorted things, neither mouse nor man, moved into the arena. Their eyes were pink and beady, their hands were claws, they could not walk erect. Elena stared in rigid attention.
>
> A shill sidled up to them, proffering a handful of explosive darts. He said silkily, "You look like expensive folk out for a night's fun. Would you like to kill some of the hybrids? A hundred bucks a dart."
>
> "Sorry," Noyes said. "No, thanks."

So much for science fiction, written back in the typewriter age and the presidency of Richard M. Nixon. Now we turn to science fact, a genuine twenty-first-century news story involving a thirty-eight-year-old Brazilian-born Chicago artist named Eduardo Kac, who is pioneering something that he calls "transgenic art." As Kac's transgenic manifesto declares, "It is a new era, and we need a new kind of art. It makes no sense to paint as we painted in the caves."

Instead of paint and canvas, Kac wants to work with genetically engineered animals as his medium. He

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has already enlisted the aid of a group of French geneticists who have combined rabbit DNA with that of a phosphorescent jellyfish to produce an apparently normal-looking bunny that just happens to give off an eerie green glow from every cell in her body when illuminated with ultraviolet light.

The rabbit's name is Alba. She is healthy. She eats, she breathes, she hops around; she is said to have a "particularly mellow and sweet disposition." But when the ultraviolet light is switched on, that science-fictiony green glow emanates from her paws and whiskers and—with particular intensity—from her eyes. Kac intended to use her in a performance-art piece in which she hops around a living room. That seems to be the totality of the "art" here—a glowing rabbit hopping around a room. This may or may not seem like art to you; but I don't want to get involved with questions of esthetics here. (His original idea was to create a phosphorescent dog, which would live with his family and which people could play with as one plays with any pooch, except that this one would glow green. But he switched to using a rabbit when the scientists told him that they had already been doing research using rabbit DNA and would be able to produce a modified bunny for him much more quickly than they could a dog.)

Kac hasn't been able to launch his new art form upon the world, though. His first announcement of his plans touched off such an uproar among scientists and animal-rights activists that the French government has impounded Alba at the National Institute of Agronomic Research, where she was developed, and refuses to release her to the artist. A custody battle is now under way.

What are the issues here?

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The animal-rights people point out that Alba may very well be suffering. Maybe so, but I tend to doubt that. Giving off a green glow under black light, it seems to me, is not likely to cause pain, physical or even emotional. If I were a rabbit, I suspect I'd find it no more agonizing to glow green than I would to be pulled out of a hat, and I haven't heard the SPCA folks objecting to that.

Some of the more imaginative anti-science activists also worry that Alba might escape and start breeding a population of phosphorescent rabbits in the wild. Aside from the fact that this is, to me, not a particularly terrifying prospect, it is, I think, a relatively low-risk possibility. We don't as yet know whether Alba's phosphorescent genes are dominant or recessive, or whether male rabbits, somehow aware of her special genetic makeup, would simply steer clear of her in the first place. Even if she did get loose and spawn a horde of glowing bunnies, the potential for environmental harm seems fairly trivial.

The objections that scientists are raising appear to center on the point that employing genetic engineering for the purpose of creating a new art form is a misuse of biotechnology, and one misuse might lead to another, bringing us eventually to just the sort of horrifying freak show that I described in my 1969 novel. "It kind of turns the searchlights back on scientists," says Stuart A. Newman, professor of cell biology and anatomy at New York Medical College, who is already using glowing proteins to track the development of limbs in animal fetuses. "There are some pretty awfully deformed animals in transgenic research, and scientists have sometimes done these things with no good theory behind it."

Possibly so. I'd certainly not applaud the creation of the sort of dog-tigers and snake-frogs I depicted in my book. But designing a rabbit that glows green strikes me as a far less malign notion, and I see no necessary and inevitable line of causation that runs straight from Alba to more appalling constructs. To call the project a misuse of biotechnology sounds awfully like that old horror-movie line about Things Man Was Not Meant To Do. The techniques for creating artificial mutants through gene-splicing are already in place; whatever you may think of Kac's artistic notions, this seems a wholly innocuous way to make use of them.

We have, after all, been practicing genetic modification for thousands of years, not by splicing genes but by selective breeding. That was how we turned wild dogs that must not have been very different from wolves into poodles, basset hounds, Yorkshire terriers, dachshunds, and chihuahuas.

Was it a misuse of animal breeding, or a waste of human ingenuity, to transform wolves into dachshunds and chihuahuas? And was it a bad thing for the animals so transformed? One might argue that there's a fairness issue here: a chihuahua is a handicapped animal, not nearly as good at seizing and devouring its prey as a wolf. Have we not done a great disservice to such creatures? Why are the activists not up in arms over that? As for the scientists' argument that using biogenetic techniques to create Alba is simply silly, is breeding a phosphorescent rabbit any sillier than breeding a dachshund or a Yorkie?

I share Eduardo Kac's amazement at the hostility of his critics. Of course, we need to know where to draw the line in genetic modification, and perhaps that's what the present debate is really about. My science-fictional amusement park would plainly be beyond the pale. But what about creating a six-

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legged cat? A centaur? Cerberus, the three-headed dog of Hell? Frivolous, maybe. But is a little genetic frivolity such a terrible thing?

Probably we'll see many such grotesqueries emerging from laboratories in the years ahead, perhaps offered to us in the name of experimental science, or as art, or for the sake of sheer debased amusement. We have the power to create such things now, or soon will, and it's hard to keep such power, once attained, from being used.

Indeed we are, it must be said, rapidly becoming like gods. But gods—especially young gods—fool around a lot; they make mistakes now and then; they are under no compulsion, internal or external, to explain themselves to their creations. And, in our bungling young-god-like way, we are likely to commit all sorts of creative acts that will embarrass us later on.

Still, the strange uproar over Kac's glowing bunny bothers me. We are passing through an odd period of Puritanism mixed with hedonism these days, full of contradictions. We see the official prissiness of political correctness coupled with a private coarseness of speech and unfetteredness of deed rarely matched in history, for example. And also we see a public fear of "science" and a desire to place limitations on its freedom of action, coupled with a private desire that "science" do something, right now, to cure breast cancer/AIDS/astigmatism/cellulite/baldness/arteriosclerosis/whatever. But telling "science" what it can or cannot do at any particular moment is a fool's game. The cure for breast cancer may, for all we know, lurk in the very technology that produces phosphorescent rabbits. The squabble over Eduardo Kac's provocative bit of "transgenic art" lays bare big areas of intellectual conflictedness and confusion in our society. ○

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15TH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

It's time to tell you the winners of the Asimov's Science Fiction Annual Readers' Award poll, which is now in its fifteenth year. As always, these were your choices, the stories and artwork and poetry that you—the readers—liked best out of all the stuff we published in 2000. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, as always, it's intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' poll conducted by Locus. This year's winners, and runners-up, were:

NOVELLA

1. **ORACLE; GREG EGAN**
2. Radiant Green Star; Lucius Shepard
3. Fly-By-Night; Larry Niven
4. Path of the Dragon; George R.R. Martin
5. Savior; Nancy Kress (tie)
5. One-Eyed Jacks and Suicide Kings; R. Garcia y Robertson (tie)
6. The Forest Between the Worlds; G. David Nordley
7. Tauromaquia; Daniel Abraham, Michaela Roessner, Sage Walker, & Walter Jon Williams
8. Green Fire; Andy Duncan, Eileen Gunn, Pat Murphy, & Michael Swanwick
9. Father to the Man; Robert Reed
10. Heart of Glass; William Barton

NOVELETTE

1. **ON THE ORION LINE; STEPHEN BAXTER**
2. The Cloud Man; Eleanor Arnason
3. At Lightspeed, Slowing; Cory Doctorow
4. Redchapel; Mike Resnick
5. Millenium Babies; Kristine Kathryn Rusch (tie)
5. Feel the Zaz; James Patrick Kelly (tie)

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6. The Young Master; Kage Baker
7. I Love Paree; Cory Doctorow & Michael Skeet
8. Chitty Bang Bang; Ian R. MacLeod
9. Vasquez Orbital Salvage and Satellite Repair; Matthew Jarpe
10. The True Story of Professor Trabuc and His Remarkable Voyages Aboard the *Sonde-Ballon de la Mentalite*; Jim Cowan

SHORT STORY

1. **THE ELEPHANTS ON NEPTUNE; MIKE RESNICK**
2. Silver Ghost; Stephen Baxter
3. Merry Christmas From Navarro Lodge, 1928; Kage Baker
4. The Royals of Hegn; Ursula K. Le Guin
5. The Gravity Mine; Stephen Baxter
6. Moon Dogs; Michael Swanwick
7. To Cuddle Amy; Nancy Kress
8. Interstitial; Paul J. McAuley
9. When It Ends; Robert Reed
10. The Shunned Trailer; Esther M. Friesner

BEST POEM

1. **10 THINGS YOU CAN'T DO INSIDE A SPACE HELMET; G.O. CLARK**
2. Dying Live on CNN; Joe Haldeman
3. My Wife Returns As She Would Have It; Bruce Boston
4. A Question of Time; Jack Williamson
5. I Must Admit; Timons Esaias (tie)
5. Fire On Ice; Joe Haldeman (tie)
6. Iggy Guards Her Secrets; Keith Allen Daniels
7. The Last Word; Timons Esaias
8. Dog Stars; Ace G. Pilkington
9. The Morning After; Leslie What
10. God's Breath; Keith Allen Daniels

Continued on page 43

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

EXPLORING

frontier?

In a previous installment, I commended **The Electronic Frontier Foundation** <*http://www.eff.org/*> to your attention and I won't hesitate to do it again. It is one of the most eloquent, and possibly the most potent, organizations advocating for our digital civil liberties. Here's its mission statement: "The Electronic Frontier Foundation has been established to help civilize the electronic frontier; to make it truly useful and beneficial not just to a technical elite, but to everyone; and to do this in a way that is in keeping with our society's highest traditions of the free and open flow of information and communication."

Now I support all of these worthy goals. My quibble with the EFF is purely metaphorical: I don't see the net as a frontier. The net that *I* browse is thickly settled. I explore it only in the sense that a tourist who wanders through Paris or a hiker who treks the Grand Canyon "explores." I suppose the argument might be made that parts of the net aren't particularly civilized, but I submit that you could stumble into precincts in any major city where you would find yourself at the far edge of polite society.

In no sense is the net an undiscovered country, as is, for example, "Space, the final frontier." It's unlikely that when you click a new link, there is the possibility you'll suddenly understand the function of dream sleep or you'll discover that Tau Ceti has six planets.

space

That being said, there are literally millions of sites where you can peek over the shoulders of true explorers, the women and men who prowl the frontiers of knowledge. For instance, when I typed the words "space science" into **Google** <*http://www.google.com/*>, I got 1,470,000 hits. You could spend *years* learning about space on the web. Let me recommend just two sites as starting points for your investigation.

One is **Space.com** <*http://www.space.com/*>. The corporation behind this site isn't shy about blowing its own horn: "Space.com is the definitive site on the World Wide Web dedicated to space and all space-related subjects. It focuses on news, information, education and entertainment. Our primary mission is the popularization of space." For all the PR swagger, this site delivers much of what it promises. Space.com's busy home page is the best place I know to catch the latest space news. As I type this on the last day of February, the top stories are the end of the NEAR mission, confirmation of mountains on Jupiter's Io and the discovery of an unexpected black hole perched in the halo of the Milky Way. But there is much more to Space.com than news. There are glorious photo galleries of everything from the Hubble's greatest hits to Earth's meteor craters.

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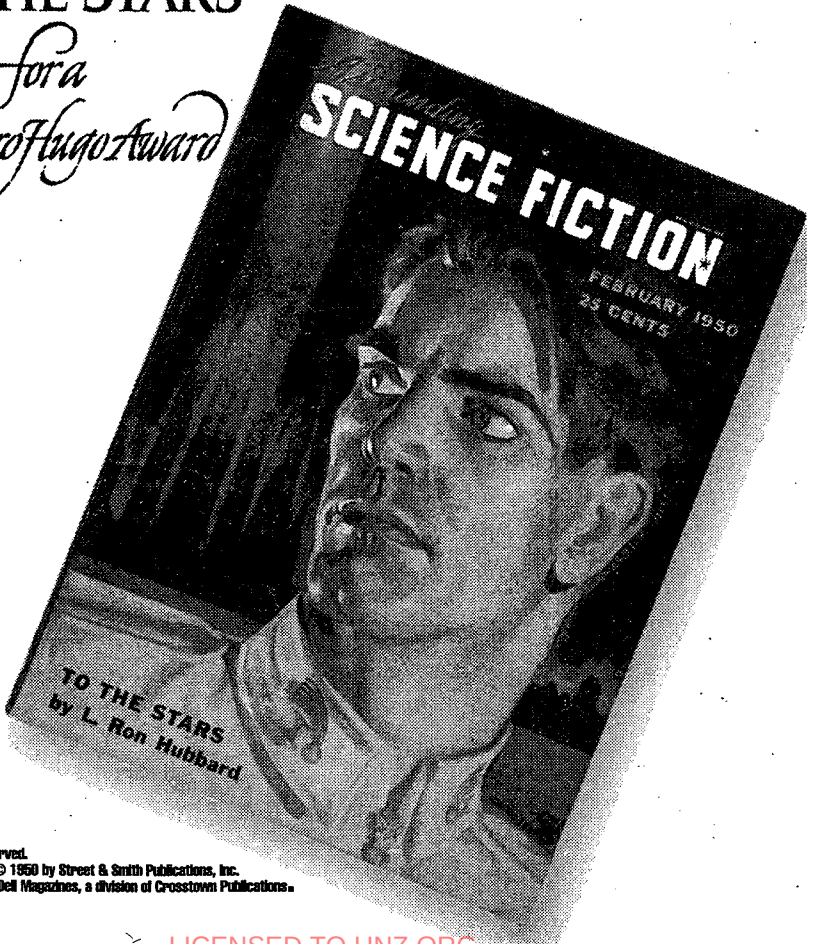

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One of the coolest picture collections is **Earthrise** <*http://earthrise.space.com/*>, 116,100 images snapped from NASA flights. You can search for pictures of any location here on the home planet and see what your hometown looks like from orbit. For those with broadband, there are a variety of multimedia files ranging from shuttle liftoffs to animations of flying over the Valles Marineris on Mars. This would be an ideal site to turn your space-crazed kids loose on; have them check out **SpaceKids** <*http://www.spacekids.com/*> or the games page. You might be surprised that Space.com has a thriving **Science Fiction** <*http://www.space.com/sciencefiction/index.html*> section. Print fans may be off put at first by the heavy emphasis on media SF, but click around and you'll find publishing news, reviews, and even some original fiction of varying quality. Space.com has also given hard SF master Larry Niven his very own digital pulpit, from which he preaches the gospel of personned space exploration.

Another indispensable space resource is **NASA** <*http://www.nasa.gov/*>. Actually, NASA is not one but many sites —far, far too many to mention here. In fact, this is probably the biggest agglomeration of sites I have ever visited; it is impossible to do justice to the breadth and depth of information NASA makes public on the web. If Space.com is the dictionary of space, then all of the NASA sites constitute an encyclopedia. The problem is, the volumes in this encyclopedia are in no particular order. A good way to navigate these sites is to click the **NASA Subject Index** <*http://www.nasa.gov/nasaorgs/subject_index.html*> and explore from there. Here are a few random highlights. If you're interested in seeing the International Space Station from your backyard, check out **ISS Visibility Data** <*http://www.hq.nasa.gov/osf/station/viewing/issvis.html*>, which will tell you where and when to spot it from 3,408 locations worldwide. Prefer a closer look? You could take a tour of the ISS hosted by MC, a cornball cartoon robot at **Meet Me at the Space Station** <*http://spaceflight.nasa.gov/gallery/video/station/mmats/index.html*>, but I wouldn't advise it unless you're in the fourth grade. Better to click the self-guided **ISS Virtual Tour** <*http://spaceflight.nasa.gov/gallery/vtour/*>; your jaw will drop, *guaranteed.* There is a site something like Space.com's Earthrise called **Visible Earth** <*http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/*> which, while it may not necessarily show your home town, is a much better tool for understanding landforms, the biosphere and human impacts on earth. Scope out a place to land your spaceship at **Mars Landing Sites** <*http://www.mars-sites.arc.nasa.gov/project.html*>.

Speaking of Mars, you may not realize that one of our own is a NASA scientist. **Geoffrey Landis** <*http://www.sff.net/people/Geoffrey.Landis/*>, whose fiction regularly graces these pages, works for the **John Glenn Research Center** <*http://www.grc.nasa.gov/*>. His projects include Mars research, photovoltaic power systems for space, and advanced concepts like the mythical faster than light drive.

future ≠ evil

On a somewhat different note, did you know that it's now possible to explore the future at **FutureFeedForward** <*http://www.futurefeedforward.com/*>? I was referred to this amazing site by **Cory Doctorow** <*http://www.craphound.com/*>, who had it from **Bruce Sterling** <*http://www.well.com/conf/mirrorshades/*>. It's hard to describe

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FutureFeedForward, but let me try. Apparently a gentleman named Redroe Boudaine discovered temporal networking in 1996, whereby information from the future could be received and used here in the past. He founded a company called FutureFeedForward to exploit his discovery. Among their products are "custom, bulleted, and accessible research reports detailing future events, markets, people, and technology." Their financial services division "is revolutionizing the consumer banking and capital-raising industries by selling money below cost." There may be a job waiting for *you* at FutureFeedForward: "Although experience is important, it can inhibit your ability to adapt to rapid and radical change. We prefer to hire individuals with interesting and diverse backgrounds, but with little or no position-related experience." All right, all right—I know you're skeptical. So was I. But just look at some of the undoubtedly authentic headlines they've culled from the future: 2/23/2056: HOME JAILING MORE POPULAR THAN HOME SCHOOLING. 7/23/2104: COMING TO A STAIN NEAR YOU: ADS! 4/23/2202: SUICIDE ARTIST FAKES DEATH, DEFRAUDS PATRONS.

Okay, so maybe the future isn't for you, but you're still interested in exploring a career change. Consider applying to **Evil Science University** <*http://evilscience.net/institutions/esu/esu.htm*>. Founded by Vlad, a refugee Romanian baron, in 1785, it is located in the quaint New England city of Fortune, which "has all the dangers of a large city combined with all the annoying failures of a small town." Judith Berman <*http://home.earthlink.net/~judithberman* >, non-evil Ph.D. and a terrific new writer, pointed me toward the site of this most famous member of the Poison Ivy League. ESU offers a full complement of courses in Evil Biology (Comparative Vertebrate Reanimation), Gender Studies (Advanced Objectification), Performance (Drinking for English Actors), Environmental Science (Killing Frogs), and Evil Art (Unwholesome Photography). Student life is an important part of the ESU experience; the most popular clubs are the Geek Council, the Chernobyl Club, the Paving Club, and the Young Authoritarians. Among the social highlights are the Martian Weekend (April 19-21, 2002), and the end-of-the-year Zombie Dance when "the zombies created as final projects in many biology and occult classes are released from their holding pens."

When you're finished perusing the ESU online catalog, consider jumping up to **Dr Vulture's Laboratory of Evil Science** "Evil deserves more than an educated guess" <*http://www.evilscience.net/main.htm*> for a tour of ESU's sister institutions, Vulture Industries and the Evil Hall of Fame.

true or false

a) Never throw rice at weddings; the birds that eat it will explode.

2) Coca-Cola used to contain cocaine.

C) Thomas Crapper invented the flush toilet.

iv) Ronald Reagan was originally cast for Bogie's part in Casablanca.

five) *Star Trek's* theme music has lyrics.

a) False. Rice and bird experts agree: birds, even small songbirds, can eat rice without harm. Many birds have wild rice in their diets. The real reason you shouldn't throw rice at weddings is that it makes the steps and floor slippery. Unsteady guests may trip and fall.

2) True. But not much, as little as 1/400 of a grain of cocaine per ounce of syrup. By 1929, Coke was coke-less.

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C) False. Actually, a gentleman named Adamson took out the original patents. Thomas Crapper ran a Victorian plumbing supply business.

iv) False. Humphrey Bogart was the only actor ever considered for the part of Rick Blaine. Producer Hall Wallis actually had the part *written* for Bogart.

five) True. The reason you've never heard them is that they are truly execrable, perhaps because they were penned by Gene Roddenberry himself. Maximum Editor Sheila Williams gets antsy when I try to quote song lyrics in this magazine so let's just say that Mr. Roddenberry's use of rhyme and meter betray someting of a tin ear.

How do I know all this stuff? I found it exploring the **Urban Legend Reference Pages** <*http://www.snopes2.com/*>. WARNING: DO NOT CLICK THIS URL IF YOU HAVE ANYTHING IMPORTANT TO DO THAT REALLY, REALLY NEEDS TO GET DONE ANYTIME TODAY. This highly addictive but invaluable site is largely the work of Barbara and David Mikkelson. Worth a regular click is **Current Urban Legends and Netlore** <*http://www.snopes2.com/info/current.htm*>, which will give you the true facts about all those cataclysmic email messages that accumulate in your inbox every week. For instance, at this writing you can get the skinny on the 809 area code (never dial it!), the petition to stop cuts at the NEA (aimed at the 1996 budget, it is undead "scarelore" that resurfaces periodically), and the notion that 75 percent of Americans are "chronically dehydrated" (not necessary to drink eight to ten glasses of water a day unless you like spending time in the bathroom).

exit

I should probably apologize for the middle of this column, but I confess that I'm a sucker for deadpan humor sites. The problem is that they're not always easy to spot. For example, be warned that there is a spoof section at the Urban Legend Reference Pages called **The Repository of Lost Legends** <*http://www.snopes2.com/lost/lost.htm*>. It looks just like the rest of the site; the fiendish webmasters would seem to have posted it as a gullibility test. Well, it fooled me. I actually typed many sentences for this column informing you that television's Mr. Ed was not a horse but was rather a trained Grevy's zebra and that, *mirabile dictu,* on the night the Titanic sank, the movie screened in second class was *The Poseidon Adventure.* No, not that *The Poseidon Adventure.* The one D. W. Griffith directed in 1911, right after he made *Metropolis.*

Wait a minute, I start out quibbling over metaphors and end up discussing arcane silent movies. What does that have to do with the theme of this column?

Exploring means never knowing where you'll end up. ❍

—Jim cheerfully invites comments and corrections at jim@jimkelly.net.

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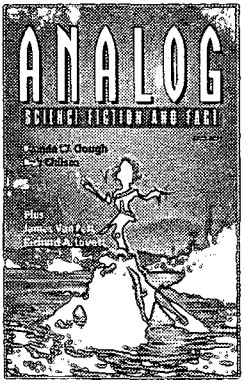

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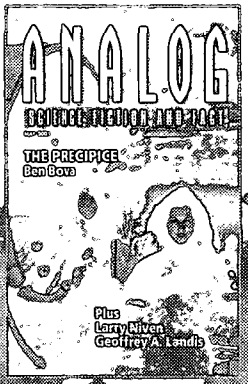

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The author's next mainstream novel, *Boulevard*, will be out in March 2002; his first science fiction/fantasy novel *Kirith Kirin* recently won the Lambda Award and is a finalist for the Spectrum, and he's half done with his next SF/F book. His play, "Free Market," premiered at The Working Theatre in New York City on June 1, and he's writing a play called "Fascination" for About Face Theatre in Chicago under a grant from Theatre Communications Group. He tells us, "I'm enjoying the three separate writing careers I have going and hope I can keep typing fast enough."

Jim Grimsley

Into Greenwood

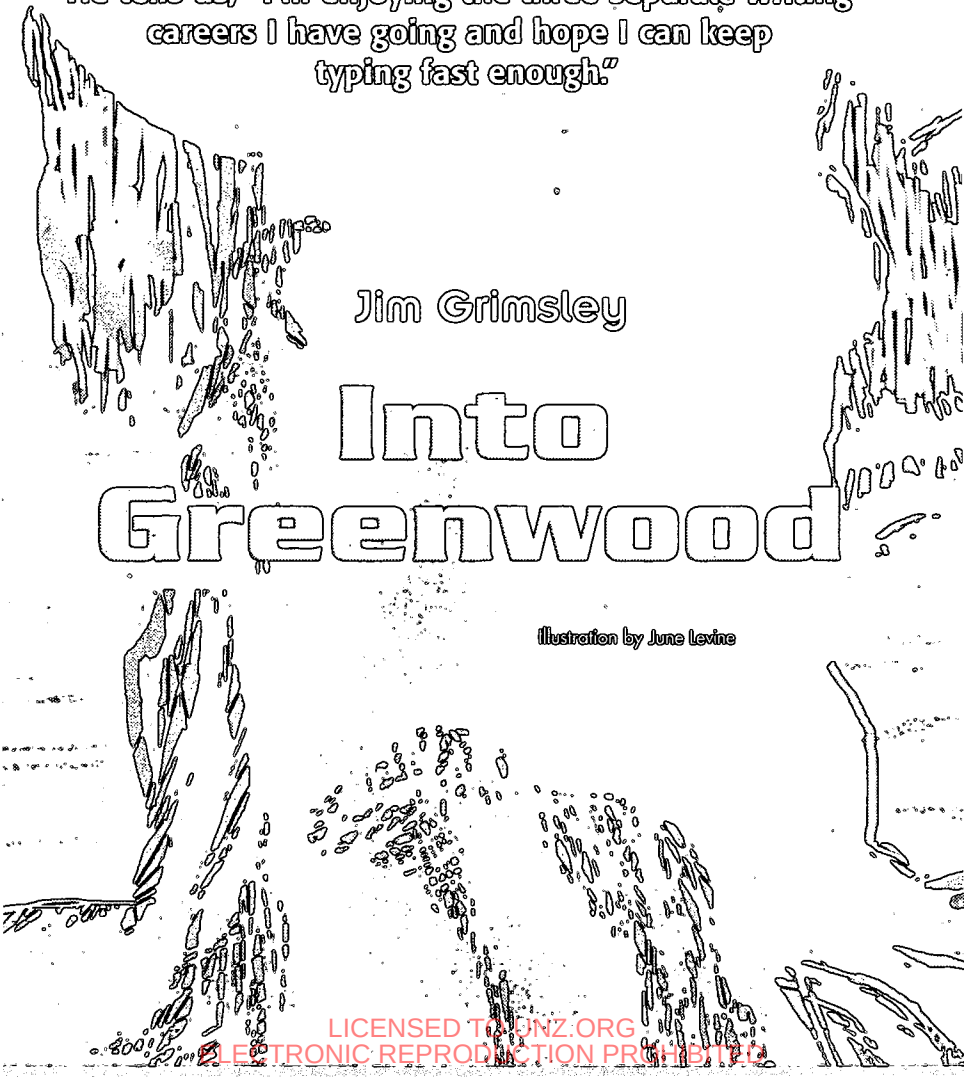

Illustration by June Levine

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One

To visit the Dirijhi one leaves coastal Jarutan by putter to travel to one of the towns near the forest where they staff a trade mission; there are no roads in Greenwood, only waterways, so one must find a boat that travels one of these routes, in my case the River Silas. One heads into the part of Aramen that the Hormling have, by treaty, excluded from settlement in order not to crowd the forest preserve. The Dirijhi no longer grow all the way to the sea as they used to, stopping about a hundred standard land units north of the coast. They never grew on the rest of Aramen, according to what we have learned since we gave them symbionts and began to communicate.

Nowadays, Aramenians live in settlements and farms right up to the edge of the Dirijhi preserve. Before entering the forest, I stayed the night in the last village along Silas, at the place where the river emerges from the canopy, a town called Dembut where a lot of early Hormling colonists settled. Though they don't call themselves Hormling any more, except in terms of ancestry, and they have no loyalty to Senal or the Mage. They're Aramenian these days, they'll tell you so stoutly, and most of them are for independence, though they keep quiet about it.

I had arrived on Aramen during one of the quiet times, when the colonial assembly and the colony's Prin administrators were getting along with some degree of harmony. I was returning from a decade-long trip to Paska, another Mage colony inside the Cluster, three years' passage each way on the Hormling Conveyance. On Paska, the independence movement was foundering, as ours was. Like my organization, People for a Free Aramen, the Paskan movement had achieved a certain ceiling of success and been stalled ever since. Their group was twenty-odd years old, ours about twice that. Forty thousand subscriber members and enough committed workers to stage a decent rally every few months. Internal arguments about what mix of sedition and pressure could be used to convince the Mage and the Prin that allowing us self government was a good idea. I learned what I could from four years with the Free Paska Coalition, but I was glad to come home again, though somewhat discouraged, after so long an absence, to find that the colonial administration seemed more entrenched than ever.

I think we could beat the Hormling, take the planet from them, but I'm not sure about the Prin. Whatever explanation you believe for the powers they exercise, we all know from experience that those powers are very real. They are the key that holds the Hormling empire together. We have seen time and again under the Prin that it is possible to make people happy even when they are not free. The Prin are good at creating contentment, complacency. All over the southern continent the rains fall regularly on the farms, the crops grow, the industries run smoothly, machinery functions, the ships and aircraft land and take off on time. Aramen is the end of the Conveyance line because the gate to Senal is here, and therefore our world is very important to the Mage. On Aramen, the Prin do their jobs carefully, everything works well, nobody goes hungry, sick people get treatment, crime is kept low, smuggling and the black market are marginal, and nearly every crime is justly punished, since nobody can fool a Prin. Hard to fight that. Hard, sometimes, to justify it even to myself, that I think we should be free of their rule.

The northern continent, Ajhevan, is a different story from the south. The Prin do not administer the weather here, or adjust the growing season, by virtue of the fact that the Dirijhi are a protected species, and this continent

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is under Dirijhi jurisdiction. The trees have made it clear to the Mage, through the symbionts, that the Prin are not welcome to come to Ajhevan. For some reason none of us have ever understood, the Mage prefers that the Dirijhi be left alone and gives them what they want. So Ajhevan belongs to them, and we humans who live here are truly free, except for Hormling taxes, in a way that nearly no one else can claim. Because we don't have the Prin here to read our minds whether we like it or not, to look over our shoulders and meddle in our affairs. But even my friends in Ajhevan have become resigned to the notion that independence will only come a long time from now. Since my return, I noticed that some of the people inside the movement had begun to speak in the same terms.

What we needed, what we had always needed, was an ally. I had hoped to find something like that on Paska. But then, a few days after I returned, a letter arrived from my brother Binam asking me to visit him in Greenwood.

The trees don't care for outsiders, though they make a lot of money running tours into the forest. They rarely grant anyone permission to stay in Dirijhi country for any length of time. But my brother was a symbiont, and I had not seen him since the change. I'd been asking him to allow me to visit for years, to spend time with him but also to sound him out about what the trees might think of independence. All of us with ties to the Dirijhi were making the same request. After many years of refusal, Binam had suddenly agreed. So I was on my way.

The Dirijhi permit only a certain kind of flat-bottomed boat to travel upriver under the canopy, so I spent the afternoon in Dembut trying to line up transportation. The river guides are all licensed, and there was actually a symbiont on duty to check my pass in the outpost station; the Dirijhi hire human staff to deal with the tourist traffic, though the sym was clearly in charge. He or she must have been melded to one of the nearer trees, though even then it's an effort for a sym to be apart from the tree for any length of time. I knew that much from Binam, who sent me letters, written ones on paper, from time to time; the only scripted letters I ever got in my life. This sym had a pinched look in the face, eyes of that iridescent silver that is the result of the tree-feeding, the pupils small in the light, though they could dilate completely in the dark, enabling the sym to see as if the world were in full noon. Binam would look like that, I reminded myself. He would still be my brother, but he would be changed.

Once I cleared my papers and booked passage on one of the riverboats, I found a hotel room for the night. I was tempted to think of the place as primitive or backward, since we were so far from what I had come to think of as civilization, but Dembut had every convenience you could ask for. Uplinks to the whole Hormling data mass, entertainment parlors that were 4D capable, clean VR stalls, good restaurants. The Dirijhi don't like big power matrices, so everything on Ajhevan runs on portable fusion generators; cold boxes, they're called, and for a village the size of Dembut, about a dozen were required to power the town. Hormling technology, like nearly everything that works in the Cluster. This and much other interesting information was piped to the screen in my hotel room, the loop playing as I keyed the door and entered. I muted the sound and threw my bag onto the little bed.

I bought a girl for the night. Her name was Tira and she had a brother who was a symbiont, too. Ajhevanoi are pretty free sexually, and prostitution is considered a nice way to make some extra money, especially in a tourist town, as Dembut is, so there are a lot of people registered with the

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agencies. People in Ajhevan are not usually hung up about lesbians, though now and then you still get a feeling that they don't know altogether what to make of us in the smaller towns, so I was apprehensive. Tira was a free spirit, though, and we had a nice dinner and went to the room and she gave me a massage and I returned the favor and then we wrapped round each other and got serious for a while. She had no problem with lesbians, clearly, and I felt worlds better when we were done. We talked about our brothers and I asked if she had seen hers since he made the change. She saw him often, she said; to be near him, she had taken up her trade in Dembut—her trade being rune-reading for tourists in the market, the sex was a sideline. She liked the forest, she liked her brother, she liked the difference since he underwent the change, she had thought about becoming a sym herself. "Beats having to work for a living," she said.

In the morning, I met the riverboat on time and waited impatiently to be underway. Today the river station was staffed by two different syms, one who had been a man and the other who had been a woman. The bioengineering that gets done on a symbiont starts with neutering, but sometimes you could tell which had been which. The eyes, though, were so difficult to read. I kept trying to place them in Binam's face.

We got underway in the eighth marking. My fellow passengers were tourists, a family from Feidre and two couples from New Charnos, southerners, all of them. They were curious about Ajhevan, so I answered their questions politely, while the pilot was busy. I was born here and grew up here, first on a group farm and then in a girls' commune. After my parents sold my brother to the sym recruiters, I petitioned the Magistrate's Court for a separation and was granted it, and lived in the commune after that. To be fair, which I don't always like to be, that's my way of looking at what happened. My parents didn't exactly sell my brother, at least, not against his will. Binam had been begging to join the symbionts since he was eight years old and got lost in Greenwood; and my parents were swayed by the bounty and by what Binam wanted, so fervently, and gave permission. I never forgave them for allowing him to make that choice himself, so young, only twelve. Especially since they were paid enough money to sell the algae farm we worked, that they had come to hate. After I divorced them, they bought a big house in Byutiban, on the southern continent, and both went to work in the Prin administration. We reconciled later, though I never did anything to lift the court decision. By then, even if I had forgiven them for selling Binam, I'd never have understood why they went to work for the Hormling.

My boat penetrated into the canopy along a string of Dirijhi cities, according to the pilot, an Erejhen who gave his name as Kirith, though since he was Erejhen that was not likely to be his real name. He pointed out how to spot a city: the trees grew closer and denser, the undergrowth was more strictly regulated, the appearance was formal. There was even a foliage pattern along the river, shrubs grown and maintained in a certain sequence by the tree through a complex process that only a fully mature Dirijh could undertake before symbionts. Nowadays, the symbionts work under the direction of the trees to cultivate the Shimmering Garden, which is the name the Dirijhi give to Greenwood.

Overhead, in the cities, the trees intertwine upper tier branches in one of seven patterns, sometimes a mix of all seven in a large city, like the capital. In the branches now and then we would see a sym, but only once that whole day did we see one on the ground. One of the couples asked if Kirith knew

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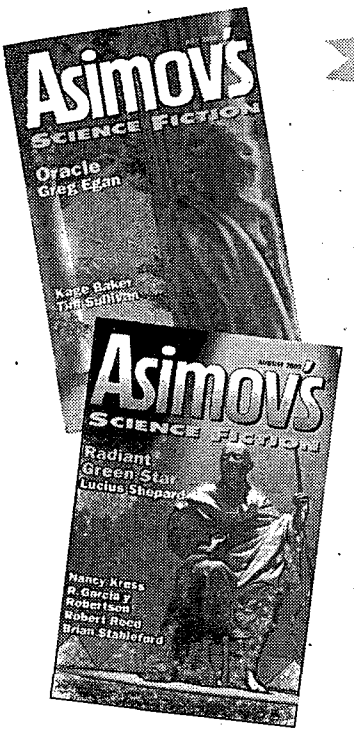

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any of the names of the cities, and he answered that the Dirijhi had no spoken language and the symbionts never attempted to transliterate the speech that passed between sym and host. The only words the syms ever gave us are the name they use for the tree people, "Dirijhi," coined from a word for tree in one of the old languages of Senal, and the name for the forest, "Shimmering Garden."

We were headed for the Dirijhi capital, near the center of the forest. There I would transfer to another flatboat that would carry me along one of the water-channels leading west into the interior, where Binam and his tree lived. We were passing tourist boats all morning as they stopped along the shore, places where the Dirijhi had agreed to allow walking tours for a stiff fee. The tour spots changed from time to time to give the riverfront trees a respite. Since the trees migrate toward the closest river or canal over the course of their extremely long lifetimes, the oldest, longest-lived trees end up along the shore and die there; though trees occasionally refuse to make the migration and many die in the interior before getting all the way to the shore. They migrate slowly, by setting roots carefully and deliberately in one direction and shifting themselves by manipulating the compression and tension of wood in the main bole, and can move as much as a full standard unit in about a standard century, about seventy years Aramenian. It takes a person about a half a day to walk that distance; it took the symbionts to tell us the trees could move at all.

The trees along the river nearly hypnotized me. A lot of them were dead and decaying, since they were the oldest; but their gardens were still maintained by syms in the neighboring trees. The living trees give off all kinds of scents, according to Binam's letters, the patterns changing with the religious and social calendar, and the effect can be ecstatic. We were getting the tourist spray along the Silas, but even that was heavenly. Some of the Dirijh rise as tall as a thirty story building, if you've ever seen one of those. They are massive creatures with a central trunk or bole and a series of buttress roots rising to support a huge upper canopy. The central bole becomes massive and the buttress roots rise up as far as the lowest branches. All the branching occurs from the central trunk, and these massive branches sometimes drop additional prop roots to the ground for support, till a single Dirijh can look like a small forest. The trees can climb four hundred stades high even in Aramen's 5-percent higher-than-standard gravity, where nobody expected to find the tallest trees in the known stars.

Standard years and standard gravities refer to the year and the total gravitic force of Senal, the Mage world. The standard is necessary since there are so many worlds to deal with in the Cluster, all slightly or very different from one another in physical characteristics. I can admit that and still get a little riled that the standard is Senal. Why not a mean year, a mean day, a mean gravity? My parents think that's a silly argument, that it doesn't make any difference. That's no reason to commit acts of sedition, to work for a rebellion, they say. But I disagree.

I moved for a while to the southern continent, to Avitran, after I got through school in the women's commune. Trained as a gene-splicer in Genetech, working in a clean lab creating one or another of the seventeen hundred legal variants from standard DNA that define the human race as we know it, three hundred years since the Hormling and their partners the Erejhen began to spread through the local stars, and nearly thirty thousand years since the Hormling themselves arrived on Senal, sent there from Earth to

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find the Mage, as the *Qons Quilian* claims. I believe the three-hundred-year proposition, I don't know about the rest. I know I don't believe in Earth.

Two

We slept on the boat, while it continued upriver on satellite guidance. Firesprays flying overhead, now and then a bit of the moon peeping through the canopy. Some of the Dirijh fold their leaves at night to bring moonlight down to the Shimmering Garden. Aramen's tiny moon Kep orbits the planet in a geosynchronous loop and is always in the sky over Ajhevan; sometimes you can see its ghost in the day. The southern continent Byutiban, on the opposite side of the planet, never sees that moon at all, though Aramen has a larger, red moon, Sith, that orbits farther out, and it goes through phases and appears in all parts of Aramen.

Because the boats are wide enough to accommodate even a tall person lying across them, there was plenty of room for us to sleep, and we spread out bedding after we ate our dinner packet. No question of our sleeping ashore; tourists aren't allowed that option at any price. I had bought a sleeping roll in Dembut, and the guide showed me how to get into it. Fairly comfortable, given the motion of the river. The boat was tight and dry; the Dirijhi wouldn't have let it run the river if it weren't. Peaceful to think that the boat would continue on its placid voyage while I dreamed.

Overnight, we passed through one of the Dirijh cities where the channels cross; out in the center at the junction grew a single Dirijh, one of the conifers, gorgeous and nearly symmetrical, rising right up out of the water, its roots immense, earth filtered out of the river clinging to them, glistening in the moonlight. We sailed around it. The guide woke me up to see; he had understood my interest, knew my brother was a sym. It never hurts for a guide to know a sym, or a relative of one.

"You ever see anything like that?" Kirith asked.

"No. We used to come to Greenwood when I was a kid, but never this far north."

"You grew up here?"

"Yes."

"You like it?"

I laughed. "Yes. Very much."

He nodded. Handsome, like most of the Erejhen I've met. He was one of the dark-skinned ones, colored like coffee, with deep, dark eyes. "This reminds me of home, this place."

"Where?"

"Irion," he said, "near the forest where the Mage comes from."

I laughed. "No, really. Where do you come from?"

He tilted his head. "You don't believe me?"

"I don't believe you come from Irion. All you Erejhen say you come from there, but most of you were born here, just like me."

His jaw set in a line. "I come from there," he said, and he turned away, offended.

All day the next day, we traveled north. This was summer in the northern hemisphere, very hot in most places, but we were perfectly cool, riding along the water in the deep shade. We came to the Dirijh capital, and I got off the boat onto a floating platform and hired a space in a channel-boat going east.

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Not a single word from Kirith after our conversation the night before. Maybe he was from Irion, but it's true they all claim to come from there, you have to ask. I'm not a follower of the Irion cult, I know as much as I need to about the place; the Prin are trained there, which is reason enough for me to distrust the rest of the Erejhen, too.

The channel-boat was ready to leave, mine was the last space to be sold, and we were underway as soon as I showed my papers, which were actual physical documents, fairly stained and tired by that time. I got a look at the trees of the central city, which is probably the better way to describe the way this city functions than to call it a capital. Greenwood is defined by rivers and channels that divide the forest in a rough grid, sometimes skewed but very clearly organized. The rivers flow north to south and channels flow east-west. The symbionts say the Dirijhi grew that way deliberately, creating the watershed to make the water run where they wanted, first defining the rivers and then dividing for the channels. The grid functioned as irrigation and fire protection for Greenwood long before it served as a highway for trade, tourists, and sym business. The central city lay at the junction of the Silas, the central river, and the central channel, which the guides have named the Isar, after a river in Irion.

A day and a half east, I got off at the junction of the Isar Channel with the River Os. From there, I would travel inland by truss. The syms have domesticated some of the animal species, including the truss, an oversized bird that has only vestigial wings but has thighs powerful enough to carry two people, in baskets slung over the truss's back, one on each side. In my case, in the other basket was the sym who owned the truss. The ride was indescribable, I thought I would break bones with all the jolting and bouncing around, but the bird could move. Leaves slapped at my forehead as we headed out of the city into rural Greenwood, the part of the forest nobody sees unless she knows a sym.

Binam's tree was a youngster and lived pretty far out. All of Greenwood is cut through with creeks and canals to bring water into the interior, and we could have navigated on those except the Dirijhi don't like the waters to be disturbed so close to their roots. The brain case is in the root crown, where it developed out of specialized root tissue that provided the trees with gravity perception. The older trees along the main watercourses can take the commotion of the boats, because they have to, but everybody travels by truss or by foot in the interior.

My companion in the balancing basket was another kind of guide, hired to lead people like me to the proper tree. Those guides are all syms, who charge a high price for time away from the host. Binam had arranged the guide and the truss, since there was no way for me to do it. The sym kept quiet on the trip, to conserve energy. With this one, I couldn't tell whether the original had been a man or a woman, and that made me uncomfortable. I watched the undergrowth, smelled the most amazing perfumes, caught flashes of sunlight overhead.

The change in the Shimmering Garden as we left the cities was marked. Different shrubs grew, and vines climbed some of the trees and then cascaded from tree to tree, spectacular festoons of flowers hanging down from the boughs. The truss paths were moss or something that looked like clover, and along either side of the path were flowering bushes, low growing trees, and other kinds of growth that the Dirijhi encourage. No more sense of formality; each tree tended its garden as it wished, and some of them were

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wildly overgrown, the central trunks nearly hidden behind green walls, screened overhead by the low-growing canopy where it was impossible to distinguish one tree from another. No one can travel safely here without a guide, though the occasional renegade or stray tourist has tried. Many of the plants are toxic to humans, and some of the poisons kill by contact; the truss paths avoid those, but most people on their own wouldn't know the difference before they were dead.

The truss had a musty smell, but no bugs I could see. Their owners keep them clean, no easy task with a bird. Dun-colored feathers. A mottled pattern of brown and dull green feathers on the back of the neck, that I grew to know far better than I wished.

We traveled through the night, and I even dozed occasionally, my head collapsed onto the woven carry-all strap, truss feathers tickling my nose. We were only allowed to stop at certain oases, mostly in public meadows that the Dirijhi cultivate to open up the canopy to the sky. A place where a Dirijh dies is left fallow for a long time, while the body decomposes, and we stopped at one of those as well. I was glad we were passing through the open spaces at night, since the Aramenian sun can be murder that time of year in the north; in fact, I hadn't dressed quite warmly enough for the night, and the rest of my clothes were bouncing up and down in the luggage tied to the truss's back.

I had learned so much from Binam's letters, nothing I saw seemed entirely foreign to me. He wrote me often in the early years when he was working as a guide, when he was fascinated by what he was learning, by the trees he was meeting, by everything in Greenwood. I was fascinated too, once I was living in the girls' compound and studying genome manipulation, safely out of reach of my parents and the sym recruiters.

The notion that my brother had changed himself from an animal to something that was a hybrid between animal and plant, to read about the changes he had gone through, astonished me. The subject is neutered, put into stasis, immune system completely disabled. The body is then suspended in a high-protein bath and infected with a first-stage virus that eventually reaches every cell, attacking the DNA itself, replicating parts of the viral DNA onto the human genome. Changes begin. The digestive system withers, becomes vestigial, and one day is gone. The heart shrinks and the circulatory system withdraws to the musculature and the skeleton; the lungs shrink and split.

At this stage, a second virus is introduced, and this one initiates another series of changes. The protein bath is sweetened with sugars like the ones the trees make. Chloroplasts replace the mitochondria in all the dermal tissues, and the dermal tissues change, the venaceous structure becomes disconnected from the blood supply. A layer of flexible xylem and phloem grows under the new dermis, forming a new circulatory system for water, oxygen, and nutrients. This system is based on the Dirijhi's own structure, but is more flexible than in the Dirijhi themselves. The skin develops stomata for release of moisture and exhale of gases, and comes to resemble a soft leaf in texture. Part of the lungs are used to compress air for speech and the rest of the lungs become a focus for xylem and phloem tissue. The blood filters through both, receiving nutrients and oxygen for the body's animal components, the muscles and skeleton, nerves and brain. The body photosynthesizes, but supplements its diet by feeding from the host through the palms, the bottom of the feet, the anus, and the mouth. The sym can slow its heart to a crawl and still function, which it does in the winter if its tree becomes dormant.

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The result is a hybrid that can communicate with its hosts and still speak to the rest of us too, a creature that is neither plant nor animal but something of both, and still legally human, according to Hormling biological law. The whole process takes three years Aramenian from neutering to the time the sym is shipped into Greenwood to meet its tree. I had studied the process in school and worked with sym techs in Avitran and Jarutan, I had seen boys and girls come in for the metamorphosis as human beings and leave, three years later, as something else.

But when I saw Binam at the base of his tree, waiting for me as if he had known when the truss would arrive, that was when it hit me, what a staggering change it was.

It was summer, and he had been out in the sun. Head to toe, he was mottled from green to gold, the chloroplasts in full bloom along his skin. He was shaped like my brother, he had the bones of my brother's face. He stepped forward to lift me out of the basket as my guide unlashed my luggage and dropped it onto the moss. We stood looking at each other, and his face was so much the same, but his eyes were milky white. "You look so different," he said, and I realized he was poring over me with the same intensity. "All grown up."

"You look different, too," I said.

He laughed, touched the top of his head. "I was hoping you brought some cubes of what I used to look like," he said, "I've nearly forgotten."

"I did. I brought pictures of Serith and Kael, too." These were our parents, though I never used the terms "mom" and "dad."

I had brought the one bag he had said I was permitted and he let me carry it. Even before I left for Paska, his letters had become infrequent, and sometimes his tone seemed more distant than not. He had told me in a rare recent letter that he'd gotten to the point where he didn't like to use his remaining human muscles so much any more, because that stirred up his human heartbeat, and he found the sensation disquieting. In motion, he appeared to move as little as possible. He walked with a sense that he was gliding over the carpet of marsh-grass and moss, up the knots of the lower tree roots.

"This is my tree," he said, and I looked up and up.

We were on a rise of land, a canal beyond some high shrubs; rocky ground, though the soil was deep and moist. The tree was young, slender compared to its neighbors, but the central bole was already as wide as a small house. We were standing at the perimeter where the outer ring of buttress roots rise up from the ground, soaring to support the lowest branch. The buttress was as thick as my waist. One of the huge main branches had dropped a prop root that was now home for a flowering vine with a sweet, unearthly smell. The branches soaring out and the bole soaring up were at the point of reaching the canopy, and already the upper leaves of the Dirijh were brushing the undersides of the branches of its nearest neighbors. Light fell in startling showers, bars of gold. Beyond the Dirijh on one side was a break in the canopy, and in the center of the meadow was what remained of a decaying tree, covered with vine and fringed with meadow grass but too huge still for anything to disguise.

"Amazing," I said.

"He's a very special tree, they've been breeding for him a long time." He had told me this before, in his letters. "I'm the only sym he's ever had. He's a little unsettled that you're here."

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"Really?"

"The trees think of us as their own. They don't like to be reminded of when they were without us."

I knew him when he smiled like that, and I was glad that the thought of his tree made him smile. Though there was something discomforting in the thought of the possessiveness of a tree.

"But he's glad you've come. He tells me so."

"He?"

"He has male and female flowers, but the female flowers are sterile."

"To avoid self-pollination?"

Binam shrugged. "It's what he wants." We were inside the ring of buttress roots, near the main bole. "He can reverse all that and bloom with sterile male flowers and fertile female flowers if he wants, or he can have both. But for now, he's a he." He tugged on something, pulled it out of the growth around the buttress. "We wove this for you. My friends and I."

A ladder woven of supple vine. Binam climbed directly up the bark, using the bark fissures for hand and footholds. I slung the bag over my shoulder and started up the rope ladder, but now that Binam was using his muscles, he was much faster than me, and knew his tree well enough that he moved by instinct, or so it appeared. He streamed up the bark to the first branching, and then led me along the branch to a flattened outgrowth overhung with a thick canopy of leaves. The syms call this kind of growth a dis, the standard Ajhevan word for sitting room. The Dirijhi learned to make the dis for the comfort of the symbionts.

Filling the dis were carvings, some for practical uses like sitting, one the height of a table. A variety of tones and weights of wood, including what looked like cork. All grown out of the main wood of the dis. "I don't live down here," Binam said, "this is for our guests. I live up higher. But I think you should have this dis, lower to the ground."

"Thanks." I set my bag on the branch, noted the fine pattern of the bark. Along part of the bark, moss was growing, and an ancillary tree had wrapped its roots round the branch and rooted into the moss and whatever organic matter was under it; this tree was flowering, a scent like vanilla. The flower was yellow with deep, rich, golden-to-brown tones in the corona. "Are you the carver?"

"Yes. Do you like them?"

"Very much." I ran my hands along the back of the nearer chair, the smooth polish of the wood.

"We do them together, the tree and I," Binam said. "That's part of the game. He throws the wood out of a branch or sends it up from the ground and I work it and polish it. I even polish with leaves he gives me," he was pausing, trying to think of a way to say in words what rarely had to be put into words at all, "leaves like sandpaper. He buds them and they flush and dry and I use them for the polish."

He was beaming. My little brother.

We watched each other, and suddenly I could read those strange eyes for a moment. I went to him and embraced him and he leaned against me, and the texture of his skin was cool and tough, the body beneath firm and spongy, so that I could not read from his shoulders or back whether he was really tense or frightened, as I had thought from what I read in his eyes. "It's been such a long time. I hardly know what to say."

"I must seem very strange to you."

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I shook my head and held him against me. "You seem very familiar. You're my brother."

Three

We got through those first uncomfortable moments when my mere presence in front of him made him feel as though he had become a freak. He looked me over head to toe, ran his hands down my arms, in my hair. He had lost the thick brown hair I remembered, his head was that mottled leaf color, covered with soft plant hairs, stiff and sticky when I touched them.

"I had forgotten what my body used to look like," he said, laying his fingers against my skin. We had been looking at the picture cubes, one of them taken on the trip to Greenwood when Binam got lost. "You're so warm. I like your skin."

"I like yours, too," I said, touching his neck, the smooth cool outer dermis, tender as a new leaf.

"I'm cool. I've been vented today, and I'm taking in moisture."

"Vented?"

"I let out air through stomae in my skin. I like to let it build up and do it all at once." Looking above. "We're in the hot part of summer. I share the heat of the tree."

"You help it cool off that way?"

"No," he shook his head. "It's only to share. The tree likes the heat on its top leaves, they have a very tough cuticle, and we make a lot of energy that way. I share the heat so I'll know what it's like. Just to share it. That's all."

"Does the tree have a name?"

"Yes. A string of proteins about four hundred molecules long." He was smiling again, comfortable. "It would translate to something like, 'Bright-in-the-Light.' But that's a very quick way of saying it. The trees don't trust anything that's too quick."

I shook my head in some amazement. "It's hard to comprehend. When they talk, what's the speech like?"

"Nothing like speech," he said. "More like a series of very specific flavors. I'm afraid it would seem quite slow to you."

"What about to you?"

"Time is different, according to where I am. Now, for instance, I feel as if I'm blurting things out to you in a rush. If you weren't here, I'd most likely be higher in the tree, sitting still, listening to the day, and time would pass very slowly. I don't have a time when I talk to the tree, because the tree is always there, in my head. That's part of the link that gets made when you meld. But if I want to talk to another tree, if we do, since we generally do everything at the same time, we listen to the linked root. The trees have a communicating root they send out, they're all networked, and if there's some conversation going on in the link, maybe we join it, or if there's not, we send out a hello to the neighbors to find out who's in the mood to talk."

I liked his face when he talked. He reminded me of the stories of people who lived in fairy-tale forests, old tales that had come to Aramen with the Hormling, most likely, about elves and fairies and whatnot. A people who lived in a wild forest with some kind of connection to the land that a modern person could not hope to attain. What the Erejhen sometimes claim for themselves, though I have seen precious little evidence. I could picture Bi-

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nam as an elf out of fairyland, and I wondered if that were better than to call him a symbiont in my head. A name that implied he was dependent on something else, that he had only an incomplete identity on his own.

"You're a symbiont, too," he said. "There's no shame in it." But here, for the first time, was an expression that I could easily read: discomfort.

"You can tell what I'm thinking?" I asked.

"The tree can. When you're as close as this."

"How?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It's not something I can do." Smiling in a teasing way. "If it makes you nervous, I can tell him not to share any of it with me."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. "What do you mean, I'm a symbiont?"

"You think of yourself as one thing. But your body is millions of things, millions of living creatures all joined in some way, and conscious in some way. You couldn't survive without the bacteria in your gut, the mitochondria in your cells. You're an assemblage, you just don't think about it."

"All right, I get the point." I added, "I'll try not to think of anything I don't want to talk about."

"If you do, the tree will know anyway. That you don't want to talk about it."

The sun was going down by then. I was sore from bouncing against the truss, had hardly slept all night. I yawned and Binam said, "I never even asked about the trip."

"Do you ever ride the trusses?"

"Not in years, since I was a guide. But I remember."

"The trees should consider a nice bio-engineered replacement animal with a smoother ride."

He laughed. Good to hear that he could still make the sound. "That will never happen. Unless the trees learn how to bio-engineer for themselves. The trees think the Hormling charge too much money for the transformation."

"The Hormling would charge for air if they could figure out how to license lungs," I said, repeating a joke that was current in Feidre fifteen years ago, but which my brother had never heard.

He cocked his head. "Well, in my case, they have licensed the lungs, and the skin, and most of the rest."

Sunlight fading. He would leave me to eat and rest, see me in the morning. No need to rush the visit. Come sundown, he would get sluggish anyway, so he wanted to climb to his bed. I didn't ask where that was. As he said, we had time. I kissed him on the cheek, though. We had been affectionate and close, when we were kids, not like some brothers and sisters. He climbed up the tree, limber as anything, moving quickly into shadow.

Four

I spread out my sleeping bag, pulled up the night netting over my face, lay there for a while and opened flaps some more to let the air circulate. I had chosen the far edge of the dis, where the leaf cover grew sparse; I could see a piece of the night sky where the canopy had broken, where the dead Dirijh lay slowly decomposing. So close to the Cluster, all I could see were her golden stars, so many beautiful yellow suns, and if I let my eyes go just out

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of focus, it was as if I were in space, staring into the huge hollow between them, the matrix of burning stars and me hanging in space, orbiting somewhere over Aramen near the white moon.

Maybe it was inevitable that I would dream about being a child with Binam, in the days when we lived on the algae farm with our parents. There are many styles of family on Aramen, but ours was still one of the common ones, easy and adaptable on a planet that still felt like a frontier at times: a man and a woman with a life contract, having children together and raising them. Our parents had settled at the edge of the East Ajhevan wetlands, a country called Asukarns, New Karns, because early on it reminded somebody of a place on Senal. We were only a couple of hours, trip by putter to the edge of the Dirijhi preserve, and our parents used to take us there, till Binam began to get obsessed with the trees.

I dreamed of one of those trips, when we were camping on the bank of a creek, looking into the deep green gloom on the other side. We were within the posted limits of the camp ground but I wondered if the symbionts were watching us from the closer trees, to make sure we stayed on our side. Binam wanted to cross the creek but Mom repeated the story of little Inzl and Kraytl, who vanished into the forest leaving a trail of bread crumbs behind them, so they could find their way out again. But the tree roots ate the bread and the trees themselves conspired to confuse little Inzl and Kraytl, and they were imprisoned by an evil tree and almost eaten themselves before their good parents found them. We were the right age for the story at the time, and, in my dream, I was terrified all over again, and, in the way of dreams, we were no longer listening to the story but inside it, and I found myself wandering deeper into the forest with Binam's hand in mine and my parents nowhere to be seen. Binam clutched a sack of bread and looked up at the trees with terror glazing his eyes. . . .

I had never thought of myself as Kraytl when I was hearing the story on my mother's knee, my brother beside her on the bedroll. I had never thought of Binam as Inzl or the two of us as orphans, but here were we both, sleeping in a tree in Greenwood.

When I woke, something with wings was sitting on a branch looking at me, and I wondered what it found so interesting, but when I looked again, the shadow had vanished. White moonlight outlined everything, while the red moon was a thin crescent. The air was as mild as when I fell asleep, though it must have been early morning by then; the canopy holds heat in at night as efficiently as it holds heat out during the day. Some low breeze stirred.

I felt restless and got out of the bedroll, walked around the dis, listened. Choruses of insects, night birds, reptiles, a host of voices swelled in the air around me, eerie, a symphony. The Dirijhi are true to their nature as plants and have remained a part of the wild, but have at the same time learned to manipulate many parts of nature. It seemed awesome to me, now that I was here among them, these huge dark shapes in the night, listening as I was to this chorus of animal voices, wondering what part was wild and what part was the trees.

I could think to myself, these are frog songs, and grasshoppers, and crickets, and lizards, and birds, and feel as if I knew what I was hearing. But for Binam, what were these sounds to him? What news was passing all around me, my senses dull to it?

I sang a song under my breath, along with all the rest. Silly, half tuneless,

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something from the girls' commune. Sliding into my sleeping roll again, remembering that the tree would know what I had been thinking, that I had wakened with a winged monster hovering over me, that I had felt lost and wondered where I was.

Five

Binam knelt over me, finger to his lips. Early. He gestured, up, with a finger, would I come up?

It was plain I was to make no sound, so I nodded, slid out of the sleeping roll still wearing my clothes.

He climbed, and I followed as best I could. By watching him, I saw the handholds and toeholds he used in the places where the distance between the branches was too great, but these places were few, thankfully, and we mounted through the leafy levels of Binam's tree to the sky.

To the east was the gash in the canopy where the old tree had fallen, where the sunrise now played itself out in a thousand shades of crimson, azure, violet, against a backdrop of clouds. We could not climb higher and the tree was not yet so tall that I could see along the top of the forest, but I was close enough.

"Remember when I got lost?" Binam said.

"And the sym found you in the top of a tree, just sitting there?"

He nodded. Smiling with an expression I could recognize as peaceful. "I come here every morning. It's my favorite place."

He sat there, the picture of contentment. But I remembered the feeling of distance in his letters. "Are you still happy here?" I asked, looking him in those white eyes.

He made a sound that was supposed to be laughter, though he sounded out of practice. "You don't waste time with small talk, even in the morning, do you?"

"Small talk. What an idea."

He was peeling some layer of tissue off the back of one of his hands. Flaky bits of leaf drifting down on currents of air. For all the world like a boy on a riverbank picking at a callus, or at the dead skin on his fingertips. "I'm dry," he said, "I need to swim."

"Well?" I asked.

He was distant, hardly hearing my voice. His eyes so pale, the pupils so tiny, he could have been looking in any direction at all, or in none. For a moment, I thought he wanted to answer, and then it didn't seem important any more. We sat for a long time in the cool lifting breeze, the heat of the distant sun beginning to strip the clouds away. Light fell on Binam, bringing out the rich greens and softer-colored variations along his skin, and he closed his eyes and sat there. "I can't tell you what a sweet feeling this is."

"The sunlight?"

"Yes. On my chloroplasts." He licked his lips, though the moisture looked more like sap than saliva. "I can feel it in every nerve."

"It must be nice."

He nodded. "This is the best time of day for it. Later, it's too hot; I can't take so much of the sun, not like the tree."

"Is this something you need?"

He nodded again. "I don't know the science for it, I can't tell you why. But

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I need a certain amount of sunlight to keep my skin growing. The outer part dies off when the new inner tissue ripens, this time of year."

I had brought a calorie bar with me, my breakfast, which I pulled out of my coveralls and unwrapped.

"Breakfast," Binam said. "That's the word. This is where I come to have breakfast."

"A nice place for it." The bar, essentially tasteless, went down quite handily.

"The tree is somewhat repulsed by that," Binam said. "Chewing and eating. It's very animal."

"I am an animal."

He had closed his eyes again, murmured, "Yes, he knows you are."

"And you?"

"Sometimes there's still too much animal in me," he answered.

"Is that your opinion, or the tree's?"

"Both."

A silence. I let the obvious questions suspend themselves. He was welcome to his opinions, after all. "You don't talk much, do you?"

"Talk? Me and the tree?"

"No. In words, like right now, I mean. You couldn't remember the word for breakfast."

He shrugged. That gesture came quite naturally. "I don't get much practice."

"What about your neighbors?"

"If we're close to our hosts, we don't really need to talk."

"You read each other's minds?"

He nodded. "I guess that's the easiest way to think of it."

"Is it better than talking?"

"It's nothing like talking. There's no way to compare it." His smile, for a moment, familiar, the way his eyes were shaped, familiar, my little brother from thirty years ago. "I like talking, as a matter of fact, right now. I forget you have to decide to do it, then you have to decide what to say. You can hide things when you talk. I'll miss it when you're gone." He stirred, reaching down with a foot, and just at that moment a cloud blanked out his moment of sunlight. "But I really want to swim."

"Can I come, too?"

He led me down to the dis and I stripped out of my coveralls. When we were on the ground he led me to a place where steps descended into the water. I followed him, taking off the rest of my clothes by the edge of the canal.

"It's clean," he said, easing into the liquid with hardly a ripple. "You don't have to worry about what's in the water."

It felt wonderful to slip into the silky liquid, to glide along the surface beside this moon-faced creature. We floated lazily in the early light, a hint of mist along the canal. Near the woody knee of one of Binam's neighbors, we stopped and headed back again. I swam close to Binam to hear the sound he was making, a low vocalization deep in the throat, like the purr of a cat.

"I love to drink," he said, turning on his back to float.

"This does feel wonderful."

"You can't imagine how wonderful, if you're part leaf."

I laughed. "You do this every morning?"

"Yes." We were ashore now, seating ourselves on the lower step, still mostly immersed. "It's one of the things I can do that the tree envies. Though he shares it."

"Shares?"

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"Through the link."

Silence, then. I was looking up at the Dirijh, trying to see the tree as Binam saw it, a living mind, a partner. I had been waiting to ask a certain question, and felt it was a good time. "Why did you change your mind and decide to let me visit you, this time? You always seemed so certain it was a bad idea."

He slid up from the water, dripping onto the stones. "I didn't change my mind."

"You still think it's a bad idea?"

He looked at me. Nothing recognizable, at that moment, in his face. "I don't mean to make you uncomfortable. I know you're my sister, but that was a long time ago, longer to me than it seems to you, even. Time isn't the same for me and you. So I didn't really want you to come. But now I'm glad you're here."

"Well, thanks. I guess."

He shrugged again. The gesture this time appeared less natural. "I can only tell you the truth, Kitra."

A chorus of birds, eerie calling high in the trees. Some of it sounded rehearsed, as if it were a piece of music some bird was performing.

"Are you upset?" Binam asked.

"No." I looked my brother square in the face. "I didn't simply want to come to see you, either, Binam."

"Then I expect we're approaching the same point from different places. There's an elegant way the trees have of saying that, but I can't put it in words."

"What do you mean, we're approaching the same point?"

"You came to talk to the trees about independence," Binam said. "I'm right, I know I am. Because that's why they want to talk to you."

Just then, in that eerie quiet, pandemonium of a kind. Something fell out of a tree across the canal, followed by a chorus of birds and animals, a sound as if every leaf on every tree were shaking, and Binam leapt to his feet in alarm.

"Oh, no," he said, watching something moving on the ground; he looked sickened, as if he were nauseous; then he said to me, "Stay here, please," and slipped into the water and swam across.

From other trees in the vicinity, other syms were descending, altogether invisible before, then suddenly in sight, maybe a dozen.

What had fallen from the tree was another sym, and when it stood (I could not tell what sex it had been) I was horrified; the poor creature looked flayed, as if it had been beaten, or worse, partly eaten, and the syms were picking something off it with their fingers, the injured sym shaking, a green fluid oozing down its face, chest, legs; not a sound coming out of it, or them. The healthy syms surrounded the sick one and picked what I guess were insects out of its ravaged skin, the injured one standing and shaking, some of the others helping to support it, and when they were done, they checked the injured one again head to foot and then laid it on the ground, cleaned the soles of the feet. One of the syms, not Binam, brought a large piece of vine and began to squeeze milky fluid out of it, which Binam took onto his palms and rubbed gently over the injured one.

This took a while. I watched. At first without any self-consciousness, then, noticing that some of the syms were looking my way, I began to feel as if I were intruding and drew back from the bank of the canal. When it was clear that Binam would be busy for a while, I climbed to the dis and made myself tea, using the micro-cup in my kit.

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When the wait stretched beyond a full marking, I took out a portable reader and scanned some of the downloads I'd brought, items from the various nexus publications I tried to keep up with. A lot of technology is forbidden in Greenwood; for instance, I couldn't do a portable VR intract or immerse myself in one of the total-music wave stations; none of the technologies we use to feed data directly into our own neural circuitry functions in Greenwood, so I was reading for the first time in years, scanning printed words with my eyes.

The whole time, I was aware of commotion, activity on the ground across the canal. A pair of trusses arrived at a certain point, bearing more syms from farther off, I guess. Everyone sat around in a circle beneath the tree involved, and the injured sym sat with them. I suppose this was some kind of meeting. I was aware of it, trying not to spy.

When the circle dissolved and the trusses disappeared, Binam returned to his tree. He climbed to the dis, shoulders slumped, visibly distracted, shaken, though his eyes were so very difficult to read. I was sitting on one of the upraised pieces of wood on the dis, looking out over the clearing. He sat with me for a while, put his hand in mine, the same shy gesture as when he was eight, the texture of his skin tough and resinous, cool. "I'm sorry that took so long," he said.

"What happened?"

He shook his head.

"Tell me."

"I don't want to." He looked up at the canopy, the bright slivers of sky beyond the leaves. Breathless, and due to the physiological alterations, he appeared to be breathing with only the top half of his chest. "I need to climb higher for a while. When I come down, we'll talk again. Do you mind?"

"No. Whatever you need to do."

He nodded. He truly was shaken, I could see it now. He climbed into the leaves, disappearing.

Six

When I was eleven and Binam was eight, Serith and Kael took us on a picnic to wild country near Starns, the border village where the River Moses emerges from the forest. We got up early and rode the boat into Greenwood to the first Dirijhi city up the river, a treat for us, my birthday coming up, and Binam old enough to join the local scout troop, wearing his new scout hat with his first pin on it, I forget for what. I was too old for scouts now, in my opinion, but watching him in the boat with that hat, his bright face, brown hair tangled over his jug ears, I envied him a little, and wished I had not gotten to be so old. He was talking to the guide, his usual shyness gone, leaning forward to look through the plexiglass bubble at the forest around us. "Do they talk to you?" he was asking.

"No, son. What's your name?"

"Binam."

"No, Binam, the trees don't talk to me. They each have a special person who belongs to them, and that's who they talk to."

"Why don't they talk to anybody else?"

"We can't hear them," Kael threw in from her seat, nervous at Binam's need for attention. "Leave the pilot alone, dear."

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The pilot turned and smiled at us. The boat was not nearly full that morning; we were awake early for the excursion. She was Erejhen, the pilot, a redhead, one of those genetic types that still recurs in their population but only rarely in the rest of us; the Erejhen can't breed with anyone else. "He's no bother. He likes the trees, that's all."

"I like them very much," Binam amended.

"Come and sit down," Serith said, his voice mild, the kind of voice that tells you you really needn't listen.

"I want to stand here."

"Well, then you can help me keep an eye on the river." The Erejhen woman looked him over. "Watch out for floating logs and branches and whatnot."

Binam nodded emphatically and folded his arms. "But I mostly need to watch the trees."

"Go ahead, that's a good thing to do, too."

"I think the trees would talk to me," he said, very seriously.

"They used to talk to me," the pilot answered, "not these trees here but the ones on my home."

"Where's that?"

"A long way from here."

"Another planet?"

She nodded. Binam's eyes got big. For a long time he had thought that every planet was somehow part of Ajhevan, he hadn't even understood the idea of Aramen, of the world we lived on; when it finally dawned on him that there were a lot of other places besides this one, he'd been very disturbed and quiet for a while. "Don't ask which one," the pilot said, "I won't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because I won't."

"What's your name?"

"Efen," she answered, and I remembered it, because it was the first time I heard an Erejhen woman given any name other than Kirstin.

"Did you really talk to trees before?"

"Oh yes. I swear. There's nothing like it."

Serith and Kael hadn't the money for a walking tour so we rode another boat back to Starns; Efen was heading all the way up to the northernmost stop before she came back. We changed boats on one of the floating landings and Binam waved at her as she sailed away.

At the end of our picnic, we noticed that Binam was missing. He had been straying farther and farther from the spread of food Serith had brought, he being the cook in our family, Kael not very good at it. We were within sight of Greenwood, and figured that Binam had been unable to resist exploring, so Kael and I went after him while Serith packed up the food and picnic gear. Into Greenwood ourselves, along the riverbank, without a guide, shouting for Binam, who never answered. Nervous, because we were not supposed to go into the forest on foot, everyone knew it, and even though we were only on the riverbank, we were afraid. We looked for a while, then went back. Kael and Serith stood at the putter stop not knowing what to do, looking at one another oddly. I remember how frightened I was to see my parents so confused. Serith reported Binam missing to the human clerk at the park station, who grew concerned when Kael added that she thought Binam had probably strayed into Greenwood.

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We stayed in a hotel in Starns overnight, when we were supposed to be traveling back to the farm. In the morning, there was still no word at first, until a putter arrived at the hotel with Binam in it, along with a human escort; one of the local syms had found him sitting in a Dirijh near the river. He had climbed nearly to the top. The Dirijh had sent word to the nearest sym to come and get him.

A long and tiring adventure. We stayed one more night in Starns; I think Serith was too nervous to travel. In bed beside Binam, I asked him what it was like to spend the night in the tree. Did it speak to him?

"Yes," he said, though we both knew he was lying, and exploded into giggles the next instant.

I have a cube taken at that picnic. Serith sits with his back to the camera, attempting to look up at the multifocus, moving restlessly instead and mostly looking at the ground; Kael is eating, pickled egg after pickled egg, along with strips of raw sea urchin, and cups of seaweed made into a puree; I am entranced in some music broadcast by whatever group I was in love with at the time, sitting with my shirt off in the sun; Binam stands behind us, looking into the forest, restlessly turning to the camera, and at the end of the cube segment he walks away altogether, so I picture that as the moment when the tree first called him, when he first felt the urge to answer.

After that, whenever he came out of a simulation with advertisements or when he saw some printed poster for the sym recruiters around Asukarns Village, he would tell Serith or Kael or both that he wanted to be a sym, he wanted to be sold to a tree. Given the size of the bounty, it was not long before our parents began to listen.

Seven

Binam rejoined me near sunset, but was distracted, not altogether present. Twice he climbed to the ground and crossed the canal, I suppose to check on his neighbor. We talked only a little. I showed him some cubes from my last visit to Serith and Kael.

"They're talking about getting out of their contract, you know. Do you ever hear from them?"

"Once in a while," Binam answered. "Serith writes. Kael sends a birthday card."

"She's very fat now. None of her doctors can figure out why. Fat blockers don't work on her. And you remember how she eats."

"You should re-engineer her."

"She's too superstitious for that."

"They're getting out of the contract? They won't be married any more?"

I nodded. "In about a year, they say. When some of their investments come to term. They're already talking to lawyers. It's very friendly; I think they're just tired of each other."

"Serith's young."

"He's only eighty. Kael's over a hundred."

"She sent me an invitation to her century party."

"I was on Paska," I said. "I haven't seen them since I got back."

He was looking off into space. As we talked, he seemed to come into focus better. "Why did you go?"

"To learn about the independence movement there. We're trying to study

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each other, all the groups who're trying to do the same thing we are, to share information."

Through the following exchange, at times it seemed to me that he was listening to someone else, someone speaking slowly, so that at first I simply guessed the tree was paying close attention.

"Do the Hormling know about your group?"

"Yes. Of course. It's perfectly legal to express the opinions that we do."

"So you do this work out in the open?"

"Most of it."

He absorbed this for a while. I was priming the micro-cup for tea.

"Why do you want independence? What is freedom to you?"

I laughed. "I don't know. Maybe I just don't like having my mind read by the Prin."

That might have been the wrong thing to say at the time. I studied Binam, who made no move or change of expression. "You mean, you don't like their control."

"Not just the Prin, the Hormling. Their economy. Their Conveyance, that nobody can compete with. Their billions and billions of emigrants through that damned gate."

"But it seems to us that the Prin and the Hormling make everything possible that happens in your world." Binam was nodding his head, maybe unconsciously; the movement appeared to have no meaning. "Some of these thoughts come from the link root. Some of the trees have been waiting to talk to you about your ideas."

So this was some kind of a meeting, and this being in front of me was more than Binam, at the moment. I acknowledged what he said, but answered his first statement. "The only thing the Prin and the Hormling make possible is each other. The Prin prop up the Hormling, who proceed to turn everything into a product and every place into a market."

"But this whole world is full of people who came from the Hormling world."

"That was three hundred years ago. None of us here is anything but Aramenian, any more."

He was listening again. After a while, saying, "We agree the Hormling are an intrusion. We do not care for the Prin."

I waited. Stunned, to be so close to what I had come for.

"What would independence offer the Dirijhi?" Binam asked. "Would you try to rule us? Or would you respect our authority, as the Prin do?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Aramen belongs to the Dirijhi," Binam said. "Even the Hormling admit as much. But we cannot control our world. When the Mage made the gate, we had no way to fight, we had to accept her presence. But now things are different."

Because of the syms. I began to understand.

"Do the Dirijhi want all of us to leave?"

He shook his head emphatically. "No, there would be no use in that. We can't grow in the south, we have no use for that place."

"Why not?"

Concern. A long silence. "Do you know anything about what makes us awaken?"

"As much as I could find out. The brain grows in the root crown when the roots are infected with a specific fungus, and a micorhiza is formed. The root tips swell and the interior cells begin to generate neural proteins; the root

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crown reacts by developing new growth cells to make a case to protect the new tissue."

He smiled. "You have studied us."

Eerie, this white-eyed creature, supposedly kin to me, speaking as if there were a hundred of him. "There's not a lot out there to read. But I looked."

"Then tell me the rest," he said.

During all the following, he seemed curiously complacent, as if it pleased him no end that I had studied the biology of the trees.

"The basal meristem grows two kinds of tissue, new xylem on one side and brain case on the other. The new xylem stays local to the base of the bole but connects to the primary xylem that runs up the bole, that forms every year in spring around the old dead tissue from previous years. The fungal brain forms hormone and protein chains in the new xylem and these start to climb up the primary xylem as water rises in the tree."

"That's good," he said. "When is the brain ripe?"

He meant when was it awake, I guessed. "When the xylem has at least one looped chain of proteins and hormones going all the way to the top and back down to the bottom, for sending and receiving messages. When the structures are all in place and the brain begins to receive energy from some of the leaves, it awakens and becomes aware. When the brain can feel the sun."

"And the water and the earth," Binam said. "The consciousness is stretched by all three of those."

"So what does this have to do with freedom?"

"The trees." For a moment, Binam only. Tired, taking a breath. Blankness superseding, as if it were water rising through him. "Our birth is very complex, and we struggled to make every tree awaken when we had no hands. We want you to understand that life is possible for us only as a partnership with you. We cannot do without the syms, now that we have them. They are our hands and our feet." Speaking of himself and all the rest in the third person. "Also that we will never have any use for any other place than this one, this continent, because the fungus that helps us awaken grows only here."

"Did the Dirijhi try to colonize the south themselves at some point?"

"Many, many times," Binam said. "The Hormling have tried to propagate us in the southern country, too, through experimentation that we allowed, but they failed the same as we. The fungus grows only here, on this continent. It is as dependent on this place as we are on it, and now we are dependent on the syms as well. So that on Aramen there will always be room for humans and for the Dirijhi, but not for the Prin or for the Hormling gate. If you agree and we work together."

"You want to close the gate?" I asked.

"We want to control it." Shallow, half-chested breaths. "So do you."

"But what about the Mage?"

"We believe she won't say no to us. If we're wrong, we have other means."

"But she's the only one who can make the gate."

"We aren't concerned with how it's made. We're concerned only that we are half the gate, whether we make it or not. And this fact should be respected, and our wishes on our world should be respected."

"You want to get rid of the Prin?"

"We prefer not to say all we want, this first talking." Binam shivering, licking his lips, that curious tongue, like a tender shoot. "We only want to propose that we talk, and think for a while, and talk more. Though at the moment, this one is tired and needs rest."

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So Binam swooned, his head swung loosely for a moment, and some change in him, of posture or expression, told me he was only himself and the meeting was over. He gazed at me and blinked. "I can only do so much of that. We should have had more syms here."

"Maybe we talked enough," I said. "You were here, listening, weren't you?"

He nodded. "It's like being at the back of the room when a meeting goes on. Though there's the other layer of it, the fact that the trees are struggling to keep up, to digest what you say and answer as fast as they can. They take turns, answering and responding. So you're not always talking to the same tree."

I shook my head. Dappled sunlight on the dis, on my hands and legs and feet. "But, anyway, it's good news, that they want to help."

He nodded. But he was looking at the surface of the canal and said nothing else.

Eight

A few days passed, more conversations took place, the last with three other syms to do the channeling, and that one was a long conversation, in which we developed a proposal for working together that I could carry back, in memory alone, to my companions in Jarutan. The trees wished for the moment that no word of their possible support for our movement should become public. I felt more suspicious of them after they made that stipulation, realizing that the Dirijhi are cautious, will move forward only very slowly, one deliberate step at a time, and only to further their own agenda; still, it was not my place to rush them or to make a decision about them, and so I listened and agreed to the one thing they wanted to plan, that some group of people return to Greenwood at some point in the near future to continue this talking, as they called it. Though the near future to the Dirijhi could mean any time in the next decade. They had been waiting for three hundred years already. No reason to act in haste.

In all this excitement, with the pure adrenaline of the talk, the growing awareness I had of the intelligence of these beings, and a feeling of luck that it was me who was to be their delegate; in all this I forgot about the sym who had fallen from the tree that first morning, the horrible wounds on its dermis. But the morning I was to leave, as Binam and I were swimming, just before my ride was due, I saw the sym climbing down from the tree to sit with its feet in the water, and on impulse, maybe because I was feeling confident and welcome, even a bit cocky, I swam across the canal and pulled myself up beside the creature.

"Hello," I said, "are you better?"

"Better?"

It did look better—he did, the bone structure appeared vestigially male to me. The wounds on the dermis were brown-edged, new green tissue growing beneath. "I saw you the day you fell. When you were hurt."

"I never fell," he said.

Binam swam up beside us, tapped me on the knee. Not even glancing at his neighbor. "You should come home now. Your truss will be here soon. Leave Itek alone."

"I was only talking," I said.

Itek had risen from the canal and hurried away, disappearing up the tree trunk.

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Binam was watching him. "I told you to come home," he said to me, and swam away.

"What did I do?" I asked, on the other shore, dripping near one of the buttress roots, being careful to stay clear of the tree's cranial vents. I was drying myself, dressing, my kit packed and leaning against the buttress.

"He was embarrassed."

"But I only asked if he was feeling better, that's all."

"Now his tree will be angry."

"What? Why?"

When he looked at me, for a moment there was only Binam in him, nothing else; it was as if I were seeing him as he would have been, had he never been re-engineered. He was frightened and angry, and said, in a hiss, "Freedom. What freedom do *you* need?"

"Binam. I don't understand."

Suddenly he was speaking very rapidly, his half-chest pumping. "What freedom do you promise Itek? Can you free him from his tree?"

"Why?"

"You saw him. He was nearly eaten alive."

I was suddenly stunned. What he was telling me. In a rush, I understood.

Breathless, a sound in the underbrush farther down the canal, my truss, come to take me home.

"The tree did that?"

"We're their property," he spat. "Why shouldn't they do whatever they like?"

"Binam. Baby."

"Don't—" He drew away from me. "Your truss is coming."

"I didn't know."

He was gasping now, looking up at the tree.

"Come with me." Though I knew better. He never answered.

The truss pulled up nearby, the rider astride its back for the moment, legs under the stump-wings.

"Binam—"

The truss-rider asked if I was ready to leave and Binam drew back, frightened. "Good-bye," he said, moisture leaking from his eyes.

"I'll come back."

He nodded his head.

"Binam. I swear."

"Go," he hissed, gesturing, turning away.

The truss rider, sensing disturbance, decided not to linger. I could think of nothing at all to say and only hung onto that basket as it began to bounce. I was trying to look backward, to watch him to the last moment. Instead, I saw Itek across the canal, staggering down from his tree again, and, chilled, I turned away.

Most genetic alterations can be reversed; the long process that makes a tree-sym can't be. The meld that binds a sym to a tree is for life, with no release. Both these decisions were made by the Hormling and the Dirijhi long ago. The sym, once sold to a tree, is unable to feed itself or even to be apart from its host tree for very long. Unable even to change hosts. These are well known facts, though the language used to describe the relationship is rarely as blunt as to call a sym a slave. I had never thought about what kind of life the trees allowed. One thinks of the sym as a fresh-faced cherub living in paradise, the image of the sym recruitment poster, as facile as that.

So I headed home. Seeing Binam's face.

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Nine

Surely I was not the first person to witness this kind of event among the syms. But when I looked in the Hormling data mass, there was nothing to be found about protections for the syms, nothing about abuses on the part of the trees, nothing about the legal relationship at all. No documentation in the public domain, nothing in the harder-to-access private data, though this was easy enough to explain, in part. The Hormling stat system doesn't extend to Greenwood. Nothing from the syms has ever been uploaded. The few people who visit Greenwood either record little about the experience or else the files are purged of any references unflattering to the trees; everything in the public database supports the same myth of Greenwood as paradise.

Even in Binam's letters, when I read them again on the boat, not a hint. But I could see his face, hear the dread in his voice.

I worked part of this out on the crossing boat, heading toward the central city, though I had to wait to get to Dembut for access to the data mass. My pilot on the first leg of the trip was the usual brown-haired brown-eyed Aramenian, but when I changed boats to head south, the pilot was Erejhen, and by luck, the boat was half empty. In the night, late, I shared the remains of some whiskey in my bag, never once touched while I was with Binam, and the Erejhen grew relaxed and voluble, to the point that she leaned toward me, her big hand squeezing my shoulder. "My real name's Trisvin. You can call me that."

"Your real name's not Kristen, or whatever you told me?"

"No. We never give our real names, not at first, it's bad luck."

"Where do you come from?"

"Irion."

"No, really. Where do you come from?"

"I was born in Jarutan. But my parents came from Irion."

"Sure they did."

She laughed, grabbing the whiskey bottle from me. "Everybody has to come from somewhere. Where do you come from?"

I told her. I told her why I was visiting, that my brother was a sym; that's all I said.

She looked at me for a long time. "I'm glad nobody can do that to me."

The same genetic difference that prevents the Erejhen from cross-breeding with the Hormling makes them ineligible for most re-engineering, too. "Do what? Make you into a sym?"

She nodded. "I like the trees, don't get me wrong. But I wouldn't want to belong to one."

Language I had heard, and not heard, all my life.

Ten

In Dembut, I looked up Tira, who had given me her access for the return journey, and we met for a drink in a vid parlor. I asked her, point blank, if she had ever seen her brother mistreated.

She blinked, and looked at me. "What do you mean?"

I described Itek, and what I had seen.

She shook her head. Something vehement in it. "I never saw anything at all like that." Not a bright girl, I was taxing her. But I wanted to tell her. To

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ask, first, *Did you know the trees do things to punish the syms? Infest their skin with parasites, refuse to feed them, burn them in the sun, alter their chemistries to make them docile*; I had begun to imagine all sorts of possibilities. *Did you know your brother might feel like a slave?* But over us, beyond the walls of glass, was the shadow of Greenwood, and I bit my tongue, not certain whom to trust.

"Ask him if he's happy, sometime," I told her. We paid for the drinks and parted, though we'd planned to stay the night together.

It would be easy to forget the look on Binam's face, to ignore his voice, *what freedom do you need?* To let this go and continue to negotiate with the Dirijhi. It's clear to me that with their support, our movement could have the leverage to bring self-government here. But days ago in my dream, Binam held my hand and dropped the bread crumbs one by one, so maybe we would be found again, when we were children and lost; only a dream, but he's still my brother.

Tomorrow, when I wake up, after copying this recording and sending it to the organization I work with, People for a Free Aramen, I'm booking passage on public putter to Jarutan, where I'll buy a plane ticket to Byutiban. I'll decide what to do next when I get there. Knowing something now that won't let go of me. The issue is still freedom, but not mine.

I am face to face with the facts, and they frighten me, because they tell me that my whole life has been based on wrong assumptions.

We believe she won't say no to us. If we're wrong, we have other means. Something hidden in the forest, something that only begins with this issue, the way the syms are treated; something is hidden there because it's the only place in the known worlds where the Prin don't come. Maybe that's too big a thought, maybe I'm only being dramatic. Maybe it's only that I know, much as I have chafed in their presence, that the Prin would learn what was happening to the syms if they were allowed on Ajhevan. So is that the only reason to keep them out, or is there more?

Beyond the river, they are brooding, the dark shapes of trees against the night sky. I watch for a long time, remembering years ago, when my father sat me down at our kitchen table and told me that Binam was gone for good. Later, I would miss Binam, become angry about his "enrollment," as they called it; later, I would raise all kinds of questions about what my parents had done; later, I would only call my father by his name, but that night when he sat back, having explained everything, a chill ran through me. "Are you going to sell me, too?" I asked.

"It's a bounty, we didn't sell him," Kael waving her thick hand at me.

"Are you?" I asked Serith.

"No," he said, but could not meet my eye. "Why don't you go to bed?"

It was a long time before I believed him. Looking at the trees now, I feel that same chill, as if the recruiter is at the door with the contract. I lie awake long into the night, as I did that first night, as if I am still waiting for my own disappearance. When I sleep, I dream I am being lowered into the tank of liquid to begin the transformation, the virus already in my blood, my breasts vanishing, my vagina drying to a flake, but I wake up whole, if covered with sweat, since for me it is only a dream. ○

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15TH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

Continued from page 9

BEST COVER ARTIST

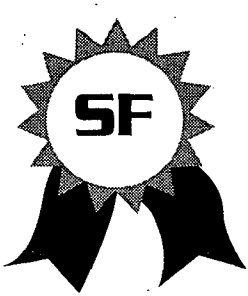
1. **BOB EGGELTON**
2. Fred Gambino
3. Stephen Hickman
4. Chris Butler
5. Wolf A. Read
6. Michael Carroll
7. David Egge
8. David Hardy
9. Nicholas Jainschigg
10. Mark Garlick

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST

1. **DARRYL ELLIOT**
2. Laurie Harden
3. Wolf A. Read
4. Alan Giana
5. Mark Evans
6. June Levine
7. Janet Aulisio (tie)
7. Shirley Chan (tie)
8. Jason Eckhardt
9. Steve Cavallo
10. Alan Gutierrez

As promised, all ballots were automatically entered in a drawing for a free one-year subscription to *Asimov's*. The winner of this year's drawing was K.L. Westt from Mesa, Arizona.

The Readers' Awards will be presented during an award breakfast at this year's Worldcon, in Philadelphia.O



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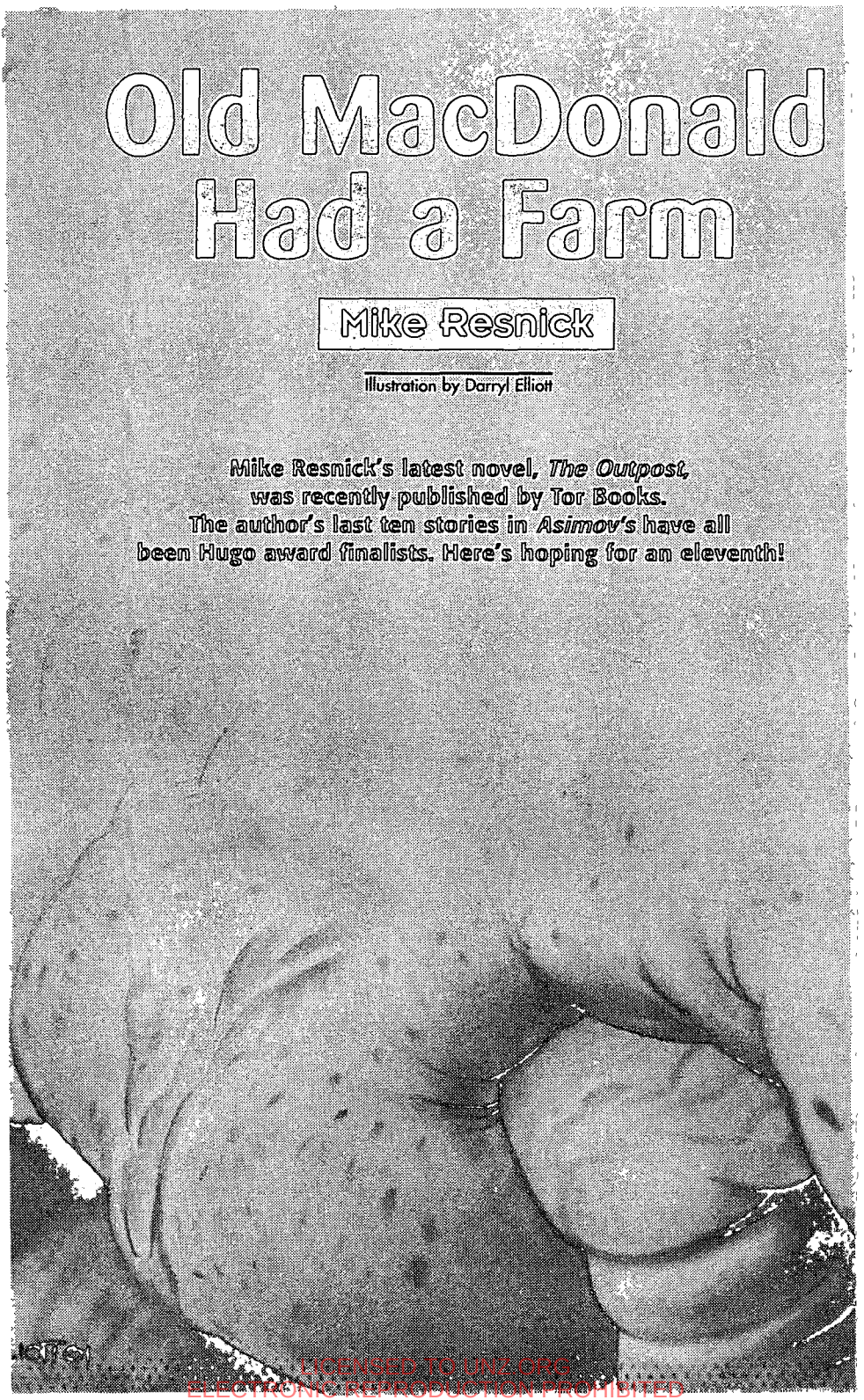
Old MacDonald Had a Farm

Mike Resnick

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

Mike Resnick's latest novel, *The Outpost*, was recently published by Tor Books. The author's last ten stories in *Asimov's* have all been Hugo award finalists. Here's hoping for an eleventh!



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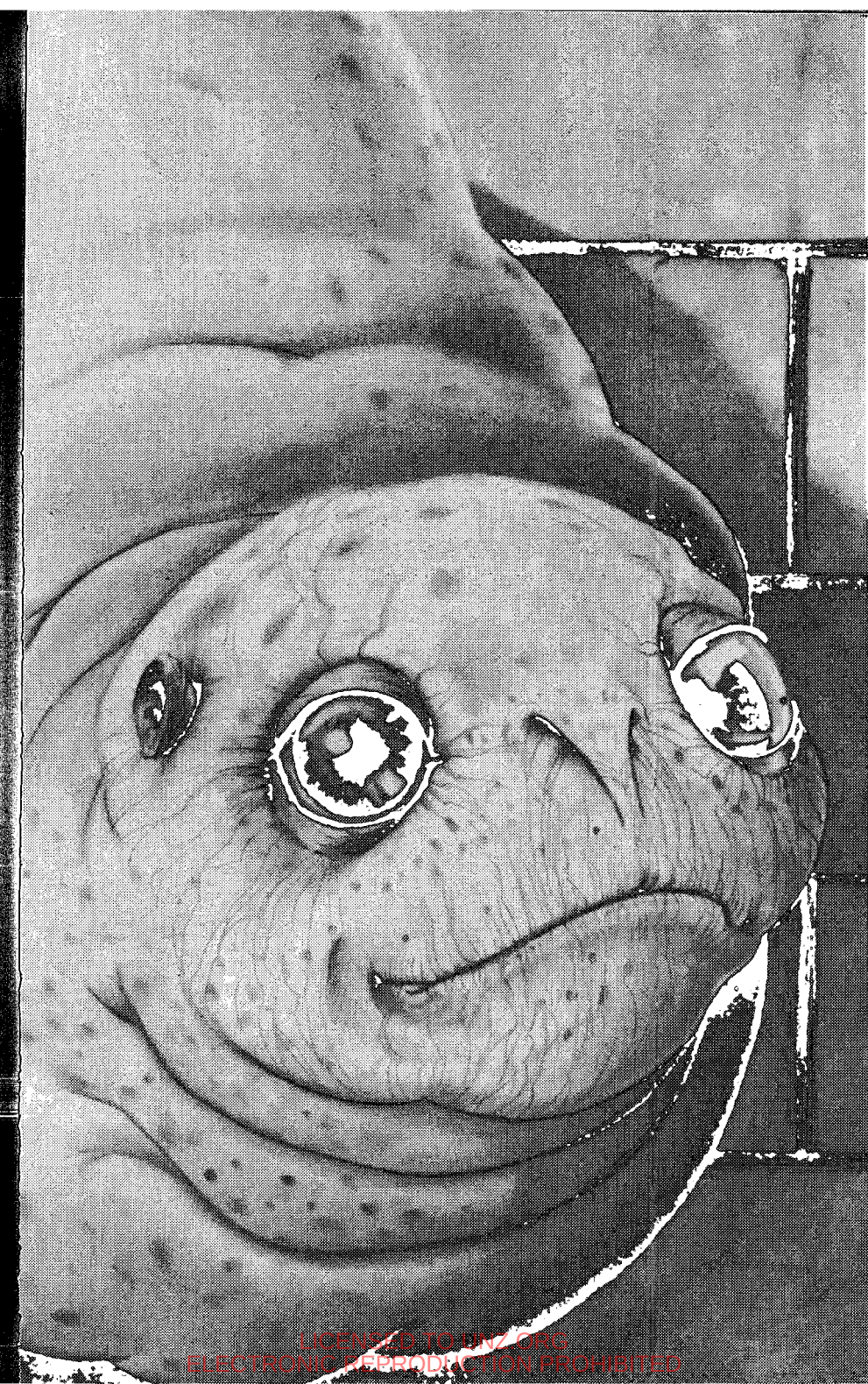

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I came to praise Caesar, not to bury him.

Hell, we all did.

The farm spread out before us, green and rolling, dotted with paddocks and water troughs. It looked like the kind of place you wish your parents had taken you when you were a kid and the world was still full of wonders.

Well, the world may not have been full of wonders any longer, but the farm was. Problem was, they weren't exactly the kind you used to dream of—unless you were coming down from a *really* bad acid trip.

The farm was the brainchild of Caesar Claudius MacDonald. He'd finally knuckled under to public pressure and agreed to show the place off to the press. That's where I came in.

My name's McNair. I used to have a first name, but I dumped it when I decided a one-word byline was more memorable. I work for the *SunTrib,* the biggest newstape in the Chicago area. I'd just broken the story that put Billy Cheever away after the cops had been after him for years. What I wanted for my efforts was my own syndicated column; what I got was a trip to the farm.

For a guy no one knew much about, one who almost never appeared in public, MacDonald had managed to make his name a household word in something less than two years. Even though one of his corporations owned our publishing company, we didn't have much on him in our files, just what all the other news bureaus had: he'd earned a couple of Ph.D.'s, he was a widower who by all accounts had been faithful to his wife, he'd inherited a bundle and then made a lot more on his own.

MacDonald was a Colorado native who emigrated to New Zealand's South Island, bought a forty-thousand-hectare farm, and hired a lot of technicians over the years. If anyone wondered why a huge South Island farm didn't have any sheep, they probably just figured he had worked out some kind of tax dodge.

Hell, that's what I thought too. I mean, why else would someone with his money bury himself on the underside of the globe for half a lifetime?

Then, a week after his sixty-sixth birthday, MacDonald made The Announcement. That's the year they had food riots in Calcutta and Rio and Manila, when the world was finding out that it was easier to produce eleven billion living human beings than to feed them.

Some people say he created a new life form. Some say he produced a hybrid (though not a single geneticist agrees with that). Some—I used to snicker at them—say that he had delved into mysteries that Man Was Not Meant To Know.

According to the glowing little computer cube they handed out, MacDonald and his crew spent close to three decades manipulating DNA molecules in ways no one had ever thought of before. He did a lot of trial and error work with embryos, until he finally came up with the prototype he sought. Then he spent a few more years making certain that it would breed true. And finally he announced his triumph to the world.

Caesar MacDonald's masterpiece was the Butterball, a meat animal that matured at six months of age and could reproduce at eight months, with a four-week gestation period. It weighed four hundred pounds at maturity, and every portion of its body could be consumed by Earth's starving masses, even the bones.

That in itself was a work of scientific brilliance—but to me the true stroke of genius was the astonishing efficiency of the Butterballs' digestive systems. An elephant, back when elephants still existed, would eat about six

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hundred pounds of vegetation per day, but could only use about 40 percent of it, and passed the rest as dung. Cattle and pigs, the most common meat animals prior to the Butterballs, were somewhat more efficient, but they, too, wasted a lot of expensive feed.

The Butterballs, on the other hand, utilized one hundred percent of what they were fed. Every pellet of food they ingested went right into building meat that was meticulously bioengineered to please almost every palate. Anyway, that's what the endless series of P.R. releases said.

MacDonald had finally consented to allow a handful of pool reporters to come see for themselves.

We were hoping for a look at MacDonald, too, maybe even an interview with the Great Man. But when we got there, we learned that he had been in seclusion for months. Turned out he was suffering from depression, which I would have thought would be the last thing to affect humanity's latest savior, but who knows what depresses a genius? Maybe, like Alexander, he wanted more worlds to conquer, or maybe he was sorry that Butterballs didn't weigh eight hundred pounds. Hell, maybe he had just worked too hard for too long, or maybe he realized that he was a lot closer to the end of life than the beginning and didn't like it much. Most likely, he just didn't consider us important enough to bother with.

Whatever the reason, we were greeted not by MacDonald himself, but by a flack named Judson Cotter. I figured he had to work in P.R.; his hair was a little too perfect, his suit too up-to-the-minute, his hands too soft for him to have been anything else but a pitchman.

After he apologized for MacDonald's absence, he launched into a worshipful biography of his boss, not deviating one iota from the holobio they'd shown us on the plane trip.

"But I suspect you're here to see the farm," he concluded after paraphrasing the bio for five minutes.

"No," muttered Julie Balch from *NyVid,* "we came all this way to stand in this cold wet breeze and admire your clothes."

A few of us laughed, and Cotter looked just a bit annoyed. I made a mental note to buy her a drink when the tour was done.

"Now let me see a show of hands," said Cotter. "Has anyone here ever seen a live Butterball?"

Where did they find you? I thought. *If we'd seen one, do you really think we'd have flown all the way to hell and gone just to see another?*

I looked around. No one had raised a hand. Which figured. To the best of my knowledge, nobody who didn't work for MacDonald had ever seen a Butterball in the flesh, and only a handful of photos and holos had made it out to the general public. There was even a rumor that all of MacDonald's employees had to sign a secrecy oath.

"There's a reason, of course," continued Cotter smoothly. "Until the international courts verified Mr. MacDonald's patent, there was always a chance that some unscrupulous individual or even a rogue nation would try to duplicate the Butterball. For that reason, while we have shipped and sold its meat all over the world, always with the inspection and approval of the local food and health authorities, we have not allowed anyone to see or examine the animals themselves. But now that the courts have ruled in our favor, we have opened our doors to the press." *Screaming bloody murder every step of the way,* I thought.

"You represent the first group of journalists to tour the farm, but there

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will be many more, and we will even allow Sir Richard Peregrine to make one of his holographic documentaries here at the farm." He paused. "We plan to open it to public tours in the next two or three years."

Suddenly a bunch of bullshit alarms began going off inside my head.

"Why not sooner, now that you've won your case?" asked Julie, who looked like she was hearing the same alarms.

"We'd rather that *you* bring the initial stories and holos of the Butterballs to the public," answered Cotter.

"That's very generous of you," she persisted. "But you still haven't told us why."

"We have our reasons," he said. "They will be made apparent to you before the tour is over."

My old friend Jake Monfried of the *SeattleDisk* sidled over to me. "I hope I can stay awake that long," he said sardonically. "It's all rubbish anyway."

"I know," I said. "Their rivals don't even need the damned holos. Any high school kid could take a hunk of Butterball steak and come up with a clone."

"So why haven't they?" asked Julie.

"Because MacDonald's got fifty lawyers on his payroll for every scientist," answered Jake. He paused, his expression troubled. "Still, this guy's lying to us—and it's a stupid lie, and he doesn't look *that* stupid. I wonder what the hell he's hiding?"

We were going to have to wait to find out, because Cotter began leading us across a rolling green plain toward a barn. We circled a couple of ponds, where a few dozen birds were wading and drinking. The whole setting looked like something out of a Norman Rockwell or a Grandma Moses painting, it was so wholesome and innocent—and yet every instinct I had screamed at me that something was wrong here, that nothing could be as peaceful and tranquil as it appeared.

"To appreciate what Mr. MacDonald has done here," said Cotter as we walked toward a large barn on a hillside, "you have to understand the challenge he faced. More than five billion men, women and children have serious protein deficiencies. Three billion of them are quite literally starving to death. And of course the price of meat—*any* meat—had skyrocketed to the point where only the very wealthy could afford it. So what he had to do was not only create an animal as totally, completely nutritious as the Butterball, he had to also create one that could mature and breed fast enough to meet mankind's needs now and in the future."

He stopped until a couple of laggards caught up with the group. "His initial work took the form of computer simulations. Then he hired a bevy of scientists and technicians who, guided by his genius, actually manipulated DNA to the point where the Butterballs existed not just on the screen and in Mr. MacDonald's mind, but in the flesh.

"It took a few generations for them to breed true, but fortunately a Butterball generation is considerably less than a year. Mr. MacDonald then had his staff spend some years mass-producing Butterballs. They were designed to have multiple births, not single offspring, and average ten to twelve per litter—and all of our specimens were bred and bred again so that when we finally introduced the Butterball to the world two years ago, we felt confident that we could keep up with the demand without running out of Butterballs."

"How many Butterballs have you got here?" asked the guy from *Eurocom International,* looking out across the rolling pastures and empty fields..

"We have more than two million at this facility," came the answer. "Mr.

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MacDonald owns some twenty-seven farms here and in Australia, each as large or larger than this one, and each devoted to the breeding of Butterballs. Every farm has its own processing plant. We're proud to note that while we have supplied food for billions, we've also created jobs for more than eighty thousand men and women." He paused to make sure we had recorded that number or were jotting it down.

"That many?" mused Julie.

"I know it seems like we sneaked up on the world," said Cotter with a smile. "But for legal reasons we were compelled to keep the very existence of the Butterballs secret until we were ready to market them—and once we *did* go public, we were processing, shipping, and selling hundreds of tons from each farm every month right from the start. We had to have all our people in place to do that."

"If they give him the Nobel, he can afford to turn the money down," Jake said wryly.

"I believe Mr. MacDonald is prepared to donate the money to charity should that happy event come to pass," responded Cotter. He turned and began walking toward the barn, then stopped about eighty feet from it.

"I must prepare you for what you're going to—"

"We've already seen the holos," interrupted the French reporter.

Cotter stared at him for a moment, then began again. "As I was saying, I must prepare you for what you're going to *hear*."

"Hear?" I repeated, puzzled.

"It was a fluke," he explained, trying to look unconcerned and not quite pulling it off. "An accident. An anomaly. But the fact of the matter is that the Butterballs can articulate a few words, just as a parrot can. We could have eliminated that ability, of course, but that would have taken more experimentation and more time, and the world's hungry masses couldn't wait."

"So what do they say?" asked Julie.

Cotter smiled what I'm sure he thought was a comforting smile. "They simply repeat what they hear. There's no intelligence behind it. None of them has a vocabulary of more than a dozen words. Mostly they articulate their most basic needs."

He turned to the barn and nodded to a man who stood by the door. The man pushed a button, and the door slid back.

The first big surprise was the total silence that greeted us from within the barn. Then, as they heard us approaching—we weren't speaking, but coins jingle and feet scuff the ground—a voice, then a hundred, then a thousand, began calling out:

"Feed me!"

It was a cacophony of sound, not quite human, the words repeated again and again and again: *"Feed me!"*

We entered the barn, and finally got our first glimpse of the Butterballs. Just as in their holos, they were huge and roly-poly, almost laughably cute, looking more like oversized bright pink balloons than anything else. They had four tiny feet, good for balance but barely capable of locomotion. There were no necks to speak of, just a small pink balloon that swiveled atop the larger one. They had large round eyes with wide pupils, ears the size of small coins, two slits for nostrils, and generous mouths without any visible teeth.

"The eyes are the only part of the Butterball that aren't marketable," said Cotter, "and that is really for esthetic reasons. I'm told they are quite edible."

The nearest one walked to the edge of its stall.

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"Pet me!" it squeaked.

Cotter reached in and rubbed its forehead, and it squealed in delight.

"I'll give you a few minutes to wander around the barn, and then I'll meet you outside, where I'll answer your questions."

He had a point. With a couple of thousand Butterballs screaming *"Feed me!"* more and more frantically, it was almost impossible to think in there. We went up and down the rows of small stalls, captured the place on film and tape and disk and cube, then went back outside.

"That was impressive," I admitted when we'd all gathered around Cotter again. "But I didn't see any two million Butterballs in there. Where are the rest of them?"

"There are more than three hundred barns and other enclosures on the farm," answered Cotter. "Furthermore, close to half a million are outside in pastures."

"I don't see anything but empty fields," remarked Jake, waving a hand toward the pristine enclosures.

"We're a huge farm, and we prefer to keep the Butterballs away from prying eyes. In fact, this barn was built only a month ago, when we finally decided to allow visitors on the premises. It is the only building that's as close as a mile to any of our boundary lines."

"You said that some of them were in pastures," said Julie. "What do they eat?"

"Not grass," answered Cotter. "They're only outside because they're multiplying so fast that we're actually short of barns at the moment." He paused. "If you looked carefully at them, you noticed that grazing is quite beyond their capabilities." He held up a small golden pellet for us to see. "This is what they eat. It is totally artificial, created entirely from chemicals. Mr. MacDonald was adamant that no Butterball should ever eat any product that might nourish a human being. Their digestive systems were engineered to utilize this particular feed, which can provide nourishment to no other species on Earth."

"As long as you tinkered with their digestive systems, why didn't you make them shit-eaters?" asked Jake, only half-jokingly. "They could have served two purposes at once."

"I assume that was meant in jest," said Cotter, "but in point of fact, Mr. MacDonald considered it at one time. After all, some nourishment *does* remain in excrement—but alas, not enough. He wanted an animal that could utilize one hundred percent of what we fed it."

"How smart are they?" asked one of the Brits. "When I was a child, I had a dog that always wanted me to feed it or pet it, but it never told me so."

"Yes it did," said Cotter. "It just didn't use words."

"Point taken," said the Brit. "But I'd still like to know. . . ."

"These are dumb farm animals," said Cotter. "They do not think, they do not dream, they have no hopes or aspirations, they do not wish to become Archbishop. They just happen to be able to articulate a few words, not unlike many birds. Surely you don't think Mr. MacDonald would create a sentient meat animal."

"No, of course not," interjected Julie. "But hearing them speak is still a bit of a shock."

"I know," said Cotter. "And that's the *real* reason we've invited you here, why we're inviting so many other press pools—to prepare the public."

"That's going to take a lot of preparation," I said dubiously.

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"We have to start somewhere," said Cotter. "We have to let the people know about this particular anomaly. Men love to anthropomorphize, and a talking animal makes doing so that much easier. The consumers must be made to understand, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that these are unintelligent meat animals, that they do not know what their words mean, that they have no names and aren't pets, that they do not mourn the loss of their neighbors any more than a cow or a goat does. They are humanity's last chance—note that I did not even say humanity's last *best* chance—and we cannot let the protesters and picketers we know will demonstrate against us go unanswered. No one will believe *our* answers, but they should believe the answers of the unbiased world press."

"Yeah," I said under my breath to Jake. "And if kids didn't want to eat Bambi, or Henry the Turkey, or Penelope Pig, how is anyone going to make them dig into Talky the Butterball, who actually exists?"

"I heard that," said Cotter sharply, "and I must point out that the children who will survive because of the Butterballs will almost certainly never have been exposed to Bambi or Henry or any of the others."

"Maybe not for a year or two," I replied, unimpressed. "But before long you'll be selling Butterburgers on every street corner in the States."

"Not until we've fulfilled our mission among the less fortunate peoples of the world—and by that time the people you refer to should be prepared to accept the Butterballs."

"Well, you can hope," I said.

"If it never comes to that, it doesn't really matter," said Cotter with an elaborate shrug. "Our mission is to feed Earth's undernourished billions."

We both knew it would come to that, and sooner than anyone planned, but if he didn't want to argue it, that was fine with me. I was just here to collect a story.

"Before I show you the processing plant, are there any further questions?" asked Cotter.

"You mean the slaughterhouse, right?" said Jake.

"I mean the processing plant," said Cotter severely. "Certain words are not in our lexicon."

"You're actually going to show us Butterballs being . . . *processed?*" asked Julie distastefully.

"Certainly not," answered Cotter. "I'm just going to show you the plant. The process is painless and efficient, but I see no value in your being able to report that you watched our animals being prepared for market."

"Good!" said Julie with obvious relief.

Cotter gestured to an open bus that was parked a few hundred meters away, and it soon pulled up. After everybody was seated, he climbed on and stood next to the driver, facing us.

"The plant is about five miles away, at almost the exact center of the farm, insulated from curious eyes and ears."

"Ears?" Julie jumped on the word. "Do they scream?"

Cotter smiled. "No, that was just an expression. We are quite humane, far more so than any meat packing plant that existed before us."

The bus hit a couple of bumps that almost sent him flying, but he hung on like a trooper and continued bombarding us with information, about three-quarters of it too technical or too self-serving to be of any use.

"Here we are," he announced as the bus came to a stop in front of the processing plant, which dwarfed the barn we had just left. "Everyone out, please."

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We got off the bus. I sniffed the air for the odor of fresh blood, not that I knew what it smelled like, but of course I couldn't detect any. No blood, no rotting flesh, nothing but clean, fresh air. I was almost disappointed.

There were a number of small pens nearby, each holding perhaps a dozen Butterballs.

"You have perhaps noticed that we have no vehicles capable of moving the hundreds and thousands of units we have to process each day?" asked Cotter, though it came out more as a statement than a question.

"I assume they are elsewhere," said the lady from India.

"They were inefficient," replied Cotter. "We got rid of them."

"Then how do you move the Butterballs?"

Cotter smiled. "Why clutter all our roads with vehicles when they aren't necessary?" he said, tapping out a design on his pocket computer. The main door to the processing plant slid open, and I noticed that the Butterballs were literally jumping up and down with excitement.

Cotter walked over to the nearest pen. "Who wants to go to heaven?" he asked.

"Go to heaven!" squeaked a Butterball.

"Go to heaven!" rasped another.

Soon all twelve were repeating it almost as if it were a chant, and I suddenly felt like I was trapped inside some strange surrealistic play.

Finally, Cotter unlocked their pen and they hopped—I hadn't seen any locomote at the other barn—up to the door and into the plant.

"It's as simple as that," said Cotter. "The money we save on vehicles, fuel, and maintenance allows us to—"

"There's nothing simple about it!" snapped Julie. "This is somewhere between blasphemy and obscenity! And while we're at it," she added suspiciously, "how can a dumb animal possibly know what heaven is?"

"I repeat, they are not sentient," said Cotter. "Just as you have code words for your pet dog or cat, we have them for the Butterballs. Ask your dog if he wants a treat, and he'll bark or sit up or do whatever you have conditioned him to do. We have conditioned the Butterballs in precisely the same way. They don't know the meaning of the word 'heaven' any more than your pet knows the meaning of the word 'treat,' but we've conditioned them to associate the word with good feelings and with entry into the processing plant. They will happily march miles through a driving rain to 'go to heaven.'"

"But heaven is such a . . . a *philosophical* concept," persisted the Indian woman. "Even to use it seems—"

"Your dog knows when he's been good," interrupted Cotter, "because you tell him so, and he believes you implicitly. And he knows when he's been bad, because you show him what he's done to displease you and you call him a bad dog. But do you think he understands the abstract philosophical concepts of good and bad?"

"All right," said Julie. "You've made your point. But if you don't mind, I'd rather not see the inside of the slaughterhouse."

"The processing plant," he corrected her. "And of course you don't have to enter it if it will make you uncomfortable."

"I'll stay out here, too," I said. "I've seen enough killing down in Paraguay and Uruguay."

"We're not killing anything," explained Cotter irritably. "I am simply showing you—"

"I'll stay here anyway," I cut him off.

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He shrugged. "As you wish."

"If you have no vehicles to bring them to the plant," asked the Brit, approaching the entrance, "how do you move the . . . uh, the finished product out?"

"Through a very efficient system of underground conveyers," said Cotter. "The meat is stored in subterranean freezers near the perimeter of the property until it is shipped. And now . . ." He opened a second pen, offered them heaven, and got pretty much the same response.

Poor bastards, I thought as I watched them hop and waddle to the door of the plant. *In times gone by, sheep would be enticed into the slaughterhouse by a trained ram that they blindly followed. But leave it to us to come up with an even better reward for happily walking up to the butcher block: heaven itself.*

The Butterballs followed the first dozen into the belly of the building, and the rest of the pool followed Cotter in much the same way. There was a parallel to be drawn there, but I wasn't interested enough to draw it.

I saw Julie walking toward one of the pens. She looked like she didn't want any company, so I headed off for a pen in the opposite direction. When I got there, four or five of the Butterballs pressed up against the fence next to me.

"Feed me!"

"Feed me!"

"Pet me!"

"Feed me!"

Since I didn't have any food, I settled for petting the one who was more interested in being petted than being fed.

"Feel good?" I asked idly.

"Feel good!" it said.

I almost did a double-take at that.

"You're a hell of a mimic, you know that?" I said.

No reply.

"Can you say what I say?" I asked.

Silence.

"Then how the hell did you learn to say it feels good, if you didn't learn it just now from me?"

"Pet me!"

"Okay, okay," I said, scratching it behind a tiny ear.

"Very good!"

I pulled my hand back as if I'd had an electric shock. "I never said the word 'very.' Where did you learn it?" *And more to the point, how did you learn to partner it with 'good'?*

Silence.

For the next ten minutes I tried to get it to say something different. I wasn't sure what I was reaching for, but the best I got was a *"Pet me!"* and a pair of *"Good's."*

"All right," I said at last. "I give up. Go play with your friends, and don't go to heaven too soon."

"Go to heaven!" it said, hopping up and down. *"Go to heaven!"*

"Don't get so excited," I said. "It's not what it's cracked up to be."

"See Mama!" it squealed.

"What?"

"See God! See Mama!"

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Suddenly, I knew why MacDonald was being treated for depression. I didn't blame him at all.

I hurried back to the slaughterhouse, and when Cotter emerged alone a moment later, I walked up to him.

"We have to talk," I said, grabbing him by the arm.

"Your colleagues are all inside inspecting the premises," he said, trying to pull himself loose from my grip. "Are you sure you wouldn't care to join them?"

"Shut up and listen to me!" I said. "I just had a talk with one of your Butterballs."

"He told you to feed him?"

"He told me that he would see God when he went to heaven."

Cotter swallowed hard. "Oh, shit—another one!"

"Another one of *what?*" I demanded. "Another sentient one?"

"No, of course not," said Cotter. "But as often as we impress the need for absolute silence among our staff, they continue to speak to each other in front of the Butterballs, or even to the Butterballs themselves. Obviously this one heard someone saying that God lives in heaven. It has no concept of God, of course; it probably thinks God is something good to eat."

"He thinks he's going to see his mother, too," I said.

"He's a *mimic!*" said Cotter severely. "Surely you don't think he can have any memory of his mother? For Christ's sake, he was weaned at five weeks!"

"I'm just telling you what he said," I replied. "Like it or not, you've got a hell of a P.R. problem: Just how many people do you want him saying it to?"

"Point him out to me," said Cotter, looking panicky. "We'll process him at once."

"You think he's the only one with a vocabulary?" I asked.

"One of the very few, I'm sure," said Cotter.

"Don't be *that* sure," said Julie, who had joined us while I was talking to Cotter. She had an odd expression on her face, like someone who's just undergone a religious experience and wishes she hadn't. "Mine looked at me with those soft brown eyes and asked me, very gently and very shyly, not to eat it."

I thought Cotter would shit in his expensive suit. "That's impossible!"

"The hell it is!" she shot back.

"They are *not* sentient," he said stubbornly. "They are *mimics*. They do not think. They do not know what they are saying." He stared at her. "Are you sure he didn't say *'feed'*? It sounds a lot like *'eat.'* You've got to be mistaken."

It made sense. I hoped he was right.

"'Don't feed me?' " repeated Julie. "The only un-hungry Butterball on the farm?"

"Some of them speak better than others. He could have been clearing his throat, or trying to say something that came out wrong. I've even come across one that stutters." It occurred to me that Cotter was trying as hard to convince himself as he was to convince her. "We've tested them a hundred different ways. They're not sentient. They're *not!*"

"But—"

"Consider the facts," said Cotter. "I've explained that the words sound alike. I've explained that the Butterballs are not all equally skilled at articulation. I've explained that after endless lab experiments the top animal behavioral scientists in the world have concluded that they are not sentient. All that is on one side. On the other is that you *think* you may have heard

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something that is so impossible that any other explanation makes more sense."

"I don't know," she hedged. "It sounded exactly like . . ."

"I'm sure it did," said Cotter soothingly. "You were simply mistaken."

"No one else has ever heard anything like that?" she asked.

"No one. But if you'd like to point out which of them said it. . . ."

She turned toward the pen. "They all look alike."

I tagged along as the two of them walked over to the Butterballs. We spent about five minutes there, but none of them said anything but *"Feed me!"* and *"Pet me!,"* and finally Julie sighed in resignation.

"All right," she said wearily. "Maybe I was wrong."

"What do you think, Mr. McNair?" asked Cotter.

My first thought was: what the hell are you asking *me* for? Then I looked into his eyes, which were almost laying out the terms of our agreement, and I knew.

"Now that I've had a few minutes to think about it, I guess we were mistaken," I said. "Your scientists know a lot more about it than we do."

I turned to see Julie's reaction.

"Yeah," she said at last. "I suppose so." She looked at the Butterballs. "Besides, MacDonald may be a zillionaire and a recluse, but I don't think he's a monster, and only a monster could do something like . . . well . . . yes, I must have been mistaken."

And that's the story. We were not only the first pool of journalists to visit the farm. We were also the last.

The others didn't know what had happened, and of course Cotter wasn't about to tell them. They reported what they saw, told the world that its prayers were answered, and only three of them even mentioned the Butterballs' special talent.

I thought about the Butterballs all during the long flight home. Every expert said they weren't sentient, that they were just mimics. And I suppose my Butterball could very well have heard someone say that God lived in heaven, just as he could have heard someone use the word "very." It was a stretch, but I could buy it if I had to.

But where did Julie Balch's Butterball ever hear a man begging not to be eaten? I've been trying to come up with an answer to that since I left the farm. I haven't got one yet—but I *do* have a syndicated column, courtesy of the conglomerate that owns the publishing company.

So am I going to use it to tell the world?

That's my other problem: Tell it *what?* That three billion kids can go back to starving to death? Because whether Cotter was telling the truth or lying through his teeth, if it comes down to a choice between Butterballs and humans, I know which side I have to come down on.

There are things I can control and things I can't, things I know and things I am trying my damnedest not to know. I'm just one man, and I'm not responsible for saving the world.

But I *am* responsible for me—and from the day I left the farm, I've been a vegetarian. It's a small step, but you've got to start somewhere. ○

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Maybe the gods really are playing dice with the universe. . . .

GAME OF NINE

John Alfred Taylor

Max reported as soon as he knew Ivins was in. "Quiet so far tonight, Doc. Good as can be expected."

"Thanks to Haldol."

"For sure," the head orderly said. "Hope it stays this quiet," he added as he started out the door.

"Agreed. I'll be right here if I'm needed,"

Max nodded and went out, leaving Dr. Karl Ivins alone with a cup of dreadful coffee and the latest installment of Richard Roe's dream journal. (They'd called the man "Richard Roe" because the hospital already had a "John Doe.")

It was peaceful here, with the violent ward two blocks away at the other end of the halls, the ventilating system the only sound, as regular as breathing, except it sounded more like surf. He took a sip from the Styrofoam cup and made a face—at least the coffee was still warm from the machine—and began to read. Roe's handwriting was bold, large italic script as readable as print, with no corrections, smears, or faltering:

I foresight last three moves of massed Tuskers by Viridian Faction may lead to oblique attack within fifty turns. Will not be able to defend against it myself because rotation comes in twenty-three turns, when I become part of Viridian. Could try to warn Urth, but that would be a waste of effort, because hindsight is Urth's only strength.

Moving for Cinnebar now: shifting four Reapers toward the Frontier. Have two more moves for Cinnebar Faction before rotation—perhaps enough to get Reapers into position before merging with Veridian?

Doctor Ivins understood what the Frontier meant. It was the gray triangle in the middle of the board. Viridian, Cinnebar, and Lapis each had their end of the three-cornered board, eighty-one equilateral triangles each, with the Frontier the central eighty-one.

But Tuskers and Reapers? To remind himself, Doctor Ivins put down the new pages, and reached for Roe's patient file, already almost four inches thick with the dream journal the amnesiac had agreed to keep, Ivins' commentary, and the additional diagrams and drawings Roe had volunteered in response to questioning.

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Roe sketched as clearly as he wrote. Unfortunate, because the Tusker's menace came through unfiltered. The tusks that gave the piece its name curved up like a boar's or elephant's, and were backed by tigerish fangs. And the thing had six legs, looking more like a mammal than an insect, or was it something in between?

The Reaper was no prettier and even harder to categorize, with a blunt, featureless head and four scythe arms rotating about its upper body, all resting on what were either wheels or curved tentacles: Ivins couldn't tell whether it was supposed to be a machine or an organism.

Like most game pieces, both were highly conventionalized, the next thing to abstract sculpture. At least Ivins hoped they were conventionalized; he didn't want to live in a universe where anything resembling a Tusker or Reaper actually existed.

He caught himself with a start, embarrassed to be taking a dream for reality, even for an instant. Not that he didn't take Roe's journal of his dreams seriously. The case was fascinating; Ivins could hardly wait to write it up.

Awake, Roe was an ordinary amnesiac— Not that ordinary, Ivins reminded himself. Roe stood six feet six, with a mane of red-gold hair, and had been found walking down Peachtree Street wearing a Sulka tie and a thousand-dollar suit with no labels or tailor's marks, his new eelskin wallet empty except for twenty equally new five hundred dollar bills. By day, only an amnesiac.

But at night, Roe was paranoid. Though Ivins suspected that there was a connection between his dreams and his amnesia.

"As you've said repeatedly, there are nine of you, three teams playing against each other on a triangular board—" Ivins liked to follow up every reading of the journal with an interview, and Roe was always cooperative, even eager.

His patient sat straighter in the chair, face shining with confidence, his voice resonant and overpowering, as impressive as his appearance. "Yes, but remember that sometimes two teams form a temporary alliance against a third. Though not for long. Because the Game of Nine is always fluid, always changing. And every move there makes things change here."

"Here?"

"In what you call reality, what you say is the universe."

"But where's *there,* where's the board? In what you call 'behind the scenes?'"

Roe smiled imperturbably. "I've used the phrase. As a simplification. Everything is behind the scenes. The board is all there is. The rest is only surface, your whole life a surface thinner than an onion skin, with everything you think or see nothing but a product of the Game."

The same old line, though Ivins persevered, always wanting to learn more about his patient's delusion. "Then you still claim the world is what philosophers call an epiphenomen?"

"*Your* world," Roe corrected.

"Not yours?"

"Only when I'm what you call awake and human. But not when I'm one of the Nine."

"When you're dreaming—"

"Unless this is the dream. Like Chuang Tzu's."

"Yes, yes," Ivins said impatiently. "Who dreamed he was a butterfly, then wondered if he wasn't really a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tzu. But

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what *are* you when you're not human, when you're playing the Game, what are the Nine?"

"I've told you before."

"Tell me again."

Roe frowned, choosing his words carefully. "You might call us gods. There's no other word for it in your language. We're larger, much larger, with faces bright enough to blind you."

"Then how do you recognize each other if your faces are blinding, know who's who?"

"We know."

"Are you male or female?"

"Neither. Both. The category does not apply."

Ivins continued, hoping to hear something new or catch Roe in a contradiction, but everything the man said was consistent. That was the frustrating thing about paranoid delusional structures—seamless and impossible to assail.

Finally, he challenged Roe directly. "You're always saying every move in the Game affects the world—"

"Produces the world," said the big man.

"Produces the world, if you say so. Which means you should be able to predict things before they happen, at least short term. So make a prediction I can check."

Roe laughed. "You want to know the winners of tomorrow's horse races?"

"No. But that would be clear proof."

"Too trivial to pay attention to."

"I *thought* you'd talk your way out of it."

"I pay much more attention to another form of your gambling. Everything about your world is trivial, but some things are less trivial than others are. You've said you bet on stocks and bonds."

"Invest, not bet," Ivins said, wanting to hear more.

"Then watch what you call technology stocks. Sell all you have before next Tuesday, because one after another tech stocks will post lower earnings than expected, and trigger a long plunge in the NASDAQ Index."

"*Really?*"

"Really."

"Thank you, Master Nostradamus."

Roe's answering smile was as otherworldly as the Buddha's.

At first, Ivins laughed at Roe's prediction, but found himself keeping a close watch on the market through the week, checking the tech stocks he owned almost every hour. On Friday, he sold them, against his better judgment, buying blue chip stocks instead, because Roe's assurance had begun to wear him down. It was one of those Fridays when everybody was buying, and Ivins came out profiting comfortably, in spite of capital gains.

But on Monday all the stocks he sold roared up, and he felt himself a fool.

Ivins felt worse on Tuesday when he realized that he *hadn't* been a fool. His stomach churned when the NASDAQ composite index went down 139 points, he trembled when it went down another 84 on Wednesday.

Wednesday night, he thought he recognized a name in Roe's journal: *Clotho has responded to the Morrighan's shift of Lapis Tramplers with opposing Tramplers. Not too subtle, since Tramplers meet head on. This will make all play on the board brutish for three threes of moves.*

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Wasn't "Clotho" out of Greek mythology? Ivins recognized another name from the journal when he looked it up: Lachesis, the second of the three Fates or Moirai. He wondered why Atropos hadn't been mentioned—she was the one who cut the thread of life.

But who was the player called Nemhain? Or the Urth mentioned in the dream journal weeks ago? And what did Roe call himself when he dreamed he was one of the Nine?

Thursday morning, Ivins had to dab sweat off his face waiting for Roe to be brought in, hoping the man wouldn't smirk during the interview. Not that he wouldn't have reason, with the market behaving exactly as predicted.

And Roe knew about the market, because he read the *Times* every morning. Roe had asked for the paper at first because reading the news might help him discover his identity, though later he admitted it was because he found trivial events amusing. When Ivins asked for examples, Roe made it clear that for him "trivial events" included such things as famine, civil war and ethnic cleansing, mass deaths from flooding or avalanche, locust plagues and terrorist bombings.

Of course, it was a fluke that Roe had been right. Anybody could be right about the market once in awhile, by sheer chance, and the man was paranoid, a patient not a prophet.

Roe didn't smirk when he asked "You did sell your technology stocks in time?" instead looking honestly concerned.

Doctor Ivins blushed in spite of himself, and could only nod in answer.

"I'm glad you took my advice," Roe said.

That was the only sticky moment in the interview, and soon the two of them were having their usual free exchange. "I know some of the names of the Nine from your journal, but not all. Clotho and Lachesis for instance—is Atropos a player too? And what are you called in your dream?"

Roe smiled approvingly. "You are clever, for a human. Your guess is right—Atropos is one of the Nine. And my name is Skuld—spelled S—K—U—L—D. Let me give you the full list."

Ivins wrote down the name of every dream player from his patient's dictation:

CLOTHO
LACHESIS
ATROPOS
URTH
VERTHANDI
SKULD
MORRIGHAN
BANDHBH
NEMHAIN.

Roe roared with laughter when Ivins asked if all their names were mythological, like those of the Moirai. "Mythological? No. *Your* world is mythological! *Our* names are real, the Game is real. Wasn't the change in the stock market enough to convince you?"

"Pure accident. Anybody can be right once."

"I understand why you might think that. The stock market being what it is—What kind of prediction could convince you?"

Doctor Ivins considered the possibilities. "I know. You say the Game affects our world—"

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"*Creates* it," Roe corrected.

"All right, creates it. So make a prediction where I can see a clear connection between play on the board and what happens here."

"Give me an example."

"In your last journal entry, you mentioned Tramplers being moved against Tramplers, and said the pieces meet head-on. So, what will that make happen in this world?"

"You'll see in two days."

"But what?"

"You'll know when it happens. Your skepticism will be shaken to the ground. And so much more will fall. Do you have friends or relatives in St. Louis?"

"St. Louis?"

"In Missouri."

"I know where it is," Ivins snapped. "Why?"

"You'll know."

That was all Roe would say. Afterward, Ivins looked at the man's sketch of a Trampler one more time. The creature resembled an animated pile-driver, an elephant with twelve legs, except that it had a head like a lobster, with two antennae rather than a trunk. Ivins preferred chessmen—sensible and much less creepy.

Later that afternoon, Ivins went to the nearest library and found the names of the rest of the Nine in a mythological dictionary. Urth, Verdandi, and Skuld were the Norns, ancient Scandinavian equivalents of the three Fates. And the Morrighan, Banbh, and Namhain had been Celtic goddesses long before St. Patrick drove nonexistent snakes out of Ireland.

The bed leaped under Ivins in the dark, almost throwing him to the floor; things fell and shattered in the kitchen. But power stayed on, even during the grinding aftershocks.

It was 04:37, according to the clock radio, and he switched from station to station, trying to learn what had happened. People kept talking about St. Louis, but nothing he heard made much sense until he went into the next room and turned on CNN.

St. Louis was burning. One camera was shooting across the river from Illinois, and the Gateway Arch started to topple as he watched. Earthquakes in the Midwest? But then they mentioned the New Madrid Fault and the winter of 1811 and 1812, when islands had disappeared during the quakes and the Mississippi had even run backward at one point. The coverage switched to Memphis, where the tall buildings on the bluff had gone downhill.

Now he knew what happened when Tramplers met head on.

Ivins decided that Roe wasn't paranoid, though the universe might be. Then he asked himself what he meant by *that*.

And if the world *was* mad, what could he possibly do to cure it?

Doctor Ivins swept up the broken glass in his kitchen and made coffee while the refrigerator hummed reassuringly, then went to watch the news again, switching channels when coverage switched to something besides disaster. Once it was light, Ivins forced himself to eat breakfast before leaving for the hospital. It was his day off and there was no chance of his influencing the Game of Nine, but he had to talk to Roe.

There was little damage on the way, a plate-glass shop front shattered

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here, a detour sign there, an occasional hint of smoke, and single-lane traffic around a collapsed boom that had held signal lights for four.

Max was on shift again and not too calm. "What's going on, Doc?"

"There seems to have been an earthquake in the Midwest."

"I know that," the orderly said. "But what's happening with the patients? All agitated, even with their meds, talking about the end of the world and God knows what."

"Then it's lucky I decided to come in unscheduled. But first I'd like to see our amnesia patient—"

"Which one—Roe or Doe?"

"Roe. I had a flash about his case when I woke up this morning. Bring him to my office when you have a moment."

"That might be some time, Doc."

"Understood."

On the way to his office, Ivins glanced into a couple of the wards. Things were a bit frenetic. One of the catatonics was walking and talking, a patient with tardive dyskinsia was doing a graceful dance to silent music, a man in the second ward was giving a speech to a wall about the rider on the pale horse and the sky being rolled up like a scroll.

His coffee from the machine was getting cold when Max brought Roe in.

The amnesiac waited patiently, letting Doctor Ivins have the first word. "You were right about St. Louis."

Roe nodded.

"Because of the Tramplers?"

Roe nodded again.

"So what will your Game bring to pass next?"

"A great deal in a little while."

"Meaning?"

"You have a term in chess. *End game.* We Nine are in our end game now."

"End game. Earlier you said the Nine would play forever, how did you say it—'from before time began till after time's end.'"

"Exactly," Roe said. "We play the Game. But one game ends, another begins."

"So what happens to *us?*"

Roe's smile was almost pitying. "It will be over soon."

"What will be over soon?"

"Everything."

"That's nonsense!"

"Perhaps to you." Roe's navy jogging suit and hands turned gray as smoke, then translucent, with the chair showing through. Only his face stayed for an instant, an incandescent blur. When Ivins opened his eyes again, the chair was empty.

The light in the room looked wrong, the shadows were too sharp, the air crackled with electricity. Ivins turned to look out the window behind him. The sun was no longer yellow, but a ferocious blue-white.

The sky roared and hissed.

Something black tumbled past the window, its scorched wing jagging just enough for Ivins to recognize it as a dead bird.

Then the window melted.

The end game was finished. ○

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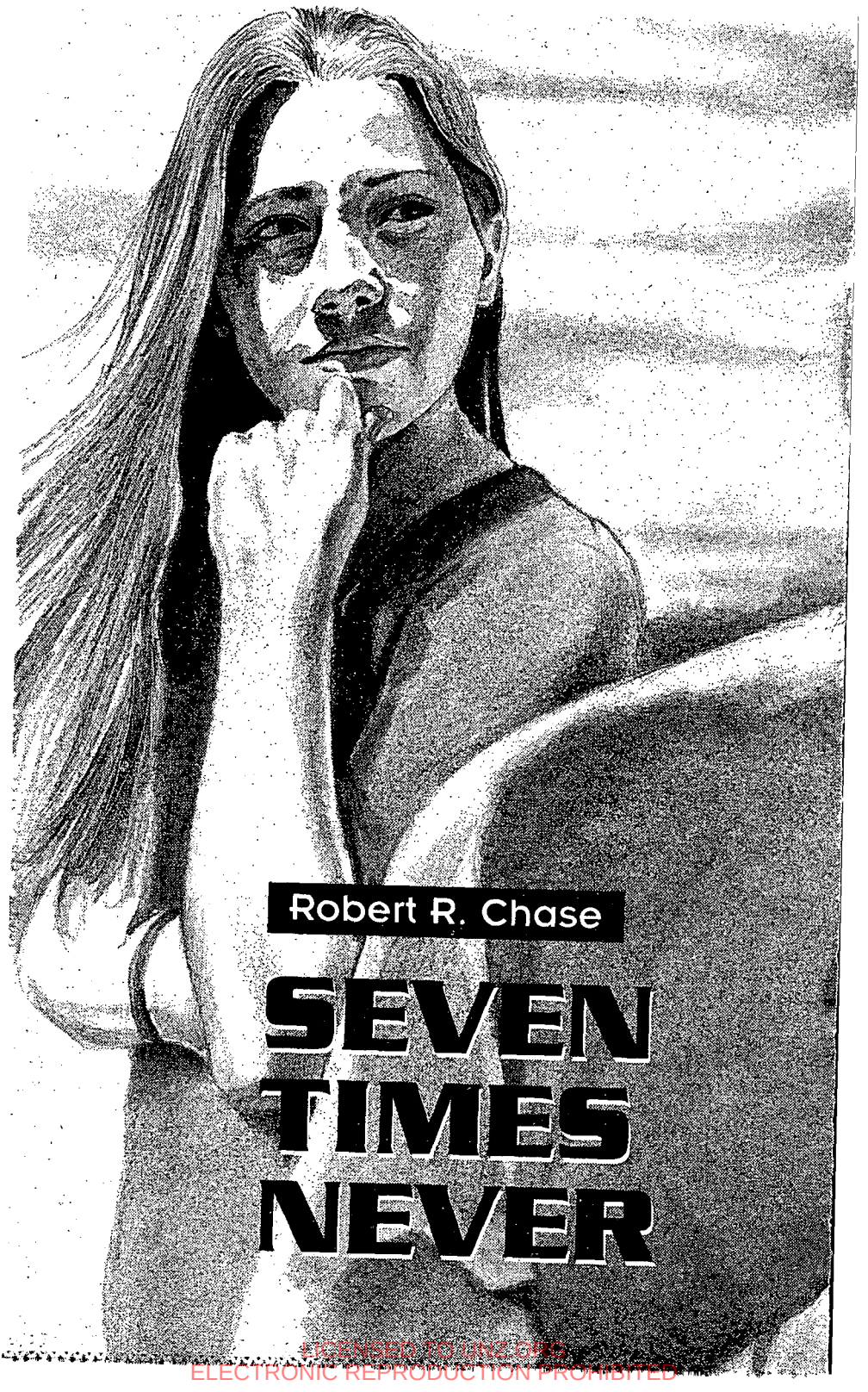

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Illustration by Steve Cavello

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March 15, 2034
To Teacher Gombih from Chela Pan, Greetings:

Well, after all these months I finally have something worthwhile to write about. This morning, I thought this would be just another boring report about work at the National Zoo, where the most exciting thing is giving a Heimlich to a seal choking on a film canister thrown into its pool by an asshole tourist. Or watching the same tourist coo over pandas trying to get it up and failing miserably. Clearly a species for which extinction is overdue.

The morning did not start out in any especially promising way. My crew had to watch a two-hour documentary that was supposed to educate us about our historical interactions with human beings. This is apparently a requirement of a Federal statute that was passed to implement a UN resolution on the rights of sentient species. So I got to sit through black and white clips of J. Fred Muggs climbing all over Dave Garroway, Bonzo giving acting lessons to a future President, and Washoe learning to swear in sign language. The high point, though, was when Ham was being taken out of his space capsule and bit one of the scientists. Lots of hooting and high-clapping. I know you don't particularly approve of that sort of behavior, but you don't approve of lying either, so I have to tell you the truth.

So after all that, we still had all our chores to do and two hours less in which to do them. Only, as I was shuffling out of the theater with the rest of the guys, I heard my name called.

"Pan?" Dr. Willis was standing behind the last row of seats. "Would you come with me, please? I have some people who would like to meet you."

I looked up, puzzled. This was not part of the schedule. But I nodded and tapped Cuss on the shoulder to let him know he would be in charge of the work crew until I came back. He made the "Shirker" sign. I laughed, and followed Willis down the hall.

After all these years, I still can't read humans well. Not only do they hide their skin under innumerable layers of clothing, they wash away and otherwise disguise their scents, and rigidly control their body movements. (I guess we do that last ourselves, but humans are much better at it!) Only if you get really close, and they're upset enough, you can sometimes catch a whiff of something that will let you know what the real score is.

This morning, my only clues were that a strand of blond hair had escaped the elastic thingy that usually held it pulled back, and that Willis was walking quickly, her whole body tense. For an instant, I thought that I was being led to a new series of doctors for tests. I knew I should never have complained about the headaches. Willis sometimes gets as upset about the way we get poked and prodded as we do. But then I realized that we were head-

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ed in the opposite direction from the medical building. In fact, we had stopped outside one of the small conference rooms, and I was being ushered inside.

There were two people at the table. The one closer to the door was a tall, balding black man whose hair was fringed with grey. He wore a three-piece suit, the type that have just recently become fashionable, and his wingtips had a gloss that would have put a West Point cadet to shame. Even at that distance, I could smell the money.

The woman was a blond, with her hair cut in the manner the *Today* show calls business woman's chic. Her own suit was an off-white, and probably more expensive than the man's. I'm sorry I can't give you more detail. Human fashion has never been one of my strong points.

"Pan," Dr. Willis was saying, "I would like to introduce you to Dr. Suleiman and Mrs.—"

"*Dr.* Elgin," the woman interrupted. Willis has a steel letter opener on her desk. I was in her office one day when she actually used it to open a letter from a great-aunt, one of the last people in the country to write messages on paper rather than on a screen. The letter opener made a quick, dry sound as it sliced its way through the envelope. Even though she did not raise it at all, Elgin's voice was like that.

Maybe it had the same effect on Willis that it had on me. She checked herself, compressed her lips, and started again. "Dr. Elgin and Dr. Suleiman wish to offer you a job."

I pointed to the ceiling with my index finger and made a quick circle. Dr. Willis chuckled and shook her head.

"What?" Elgin asked. "I thought I understood the standard signs, but I don't recognize that one."

"Pan wants to know if the job has to do with the high orbitals," Dr. Willis explained. "His ambition for the last five years has been to qualify for one of the mixed work crews. That is why he has worked so hard on his science scores and general physical fitness."

"What we have in mind will be much more beneficial for his people," Elgin said.

"Pan." Suleiman spoke for the first time. He had a voice that sounded like it was coming from an oak barrel. There was just the trace of an accent I could not place, but it smoothed over his words, as if they were stones found near the sea shore.

"My specialty is biology. My wife's discipline is political science. We are here as representatives of the Progressive Alliance Party. As you may be aware, one of our main objectives is to secure legal equality for all sentient species. To further this objective, we have been looking for members of the newly enhanced, sentient species who can speak for themselves. The operation, of course, is one of the main reasons why our subject must be in perfect health."

"He is, isn't he?" Elgin asked. "I find his record lacking in detail."

Operation?

"He is tall for his thirteen years, and generally in excellent health," Dr. Willis said. "However, he does get headaches from time to time. Sometimes they are quite severe and he has to miss work for a day or more. All of the enhanced chimps have occasional headaches, some more often than Pan."

"Why?" Elgin asked.

What operation? I signed.

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"Nobody knows." Dr. Willis sounded a bit defensive. "You have to remember that the geneticists responsible for the intelligence enhancement experiments were to some extent feeling their way. They still are, for that matter. They know that there is a ripple effect every time a major change is made in the genome. They want to limit the number of changes made in any generation, in order to make it easier to trace the cause of any mis— of any unexpected results." She paused

"Enhancing the intelligence of chimpanzees necessarily entailed increasing the size of their brains. That meant the increasing size of the braincase. Some zoologists contend that it was not increased enough, and that the headaches are caused by pressure on the meninges. Others say that the real problem is that even with the reduced jaw, the skull is now too heavy for the current configuration of neck muscles. Both sides have evidence supporting their conclusions. The important point is that the headaches have caused Pan to miss only five days of work in the past six months."

What operation? I insisted.

This time, Dr. Willis noticed. "If you accept their job offer, Dr. Sulieman and Dr. Elgin have graciously agreed to pay for an esophageal reconstruction. You will be able to talk like a human being."

That was something to consider. All six of the chimps currently in the astronaut corps have undergone such surgery. The flight directors consider it a safety as well as a technical requirement. I've been saving for the operation, but it will be five years before I have the price. I could work three years for these guys and still be ahead of the game. . .

"This is very important," Suleiman was saying. "It is so easy for humans to see your people as merely clever animals, amusing at best, dangerous at worst. Yet our DNA is nearly identical. When you carry our message, it will be clear that our hearts and minds are identical as well. You should do well at that. I understand that you are quite articulate in written expression."

"He keeps a journal," Dr. Willis said, "and periodically sends off pages to one of his old teachers named Gombih."

Elgin looked from her to me with a frown of concern. "This isn't the chimp cult leader, is it? We need a rational subject, not a wide-eyed mystic. There is enough of that nonsense on *our* side. We had hoped to preserve this race from contamination."

I suppose you will understand if I say I was getting more than a little irritated. So was Dr. Willis. "I don't know that much about Gombih, but I do know that the Dalai Lama, the Pope, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations have all been favorably impressed by him. I know a great deal more about Pan. He is a hard and efficient worker, sometimes a bit mischievous, but clearly a natural leader. His work record and his course grades speak for themselves. If they are not adequate to your needs, you would be well advised to look elsewhere."

And, as they say, don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out. My big chance was winging away, and I felt sad and relieved at the same time. If these Progressive Alliance types didn't like you, then we were not going to get along anyway.

"I have read about Gombih," Suleiman said. "He has constructed a creed that is one part Genesis, two parts Kipling, and miscellaneous parts far-out evolutionary theories. Altogether an intellectually indigestible stew."

He sighed. "I suppose we should not be too hard on Pan. His race has only three generations of experience with intelligence. *We* have had thousands,

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and we still have not rid ourselves of cabalistic claptrap." They exchanged looks, and then he said:

"Show him the contract."

The starting salary is three times what the National Zoo has been paying me. The term is a year, with options to renew for two additional years. Pay increases contingent on performance ratings.

Attached to this was an even longer notice telling me the success rate for esophageal reconstruction (97 percent), the dangers should something go wrong (death, paralysis, a voice like a transgendered night club entertainer), and my legal recourse should any of these eventuate (none).

"Are you sure you want to go through with this, Pan?" Dr. Willis asked. Elgin and Suleiman frowned at her, as if they understood that her main concern was not the operation.

Sure, I signed. It has to beat shoveling elephant shit.

ii.

March 28, 2034

Last night was my farewell party. Dr. Willis arranged it with Will Linden, the head of the Primate section. It was a big surprise to see Zoo Director Pryce-Jones there as well as Assistant Director Andreesen, as well as half a dozen well-heeled Friends of the Zoo. The Director made a few introductory remarks about how sad the Zoo would be to see me go, but how sure they were that I would represent the Zoo well in the wide world beyond the gates. Linden's remarks were a bit strained. He has never been sure whether I am one of his charges or one of his employees. Still, he said nice things about me as well. I was on my best behavior, taking care not to slurp too loudly, and signing how grateful I was to have had my start at the zoo. Willis didn't say anything, but I know that she was the one responsible for getting the kitchen to make those special treats. Ants and termites on a stick, held together with corn syrup and chocolate coating. Formic acid, yum!

Afterward, I got to go back to the dorm, where the gang held its own going-away party for me. Cuss had been rescuing melon rinds from the compost for months, and had been able to ferment a brew with the kick of a mule—the main reason I am writing this slowly and will make this shorter than usual.

We sat around the common room table, sipping home brew and telling stories. Ally remembered how she and I had put some of the smaller kids on the giant turtles and had them race across the lawn, going almost two feet a minute! Jimbo told the story about how I snuck into the tiger's den to lay an ostrich feather on its head on a bet. And how it woke up and roared as I was making my escape, startling me so much that I fell into the moat and splashed about in panic until I was able to make my way up the bank and over the fence. Everybody had a good laugh at that. I know there were other stories, but I can't remember them now.

I hope I am doing the right thing. I know that this was basically a dead-end job, and one that was not going to get me much closer to space, but we have a good crew here. There were humans I liked, like Dr. Willis, but even the ones I didn't like usually acted fairly. The tourists were almost always friendly, and the zoo made sure that protesters were kept out on the Connecticut Avenue sidewalks.

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I have been trying to research the Progressive Alliance Party. As far as I can tell, the measures they have sponsored have been beneficial for us. It bothers me, though, that Suleiman and Elgin don't like you. They should.

Maybe I can change that.

iii.

March 30, 2034

My big day with the surgeon today. Her name is Elaine Torr. She was still a bit put out about having to work in a vet clinic, even though it turns out that she and the vet are golfing buddies. Her hospital had a fit at the thought of their beautiful sterility being fouled by a dirty animal (me). But the room was set up to her liking. We had done the measurements on my last visit, so this time we were able to get right down to business. She handed me what looked like two tubes melted together, Dali's version of macaroni maybe, and stood grinning like a proud mama.

Hoping not to appear stupid, I asked with my keypad if this was what my throat would look like when she was through.

She laughed. "That, Pan, is going to *be* your throat when we get through. This is a biogenerative plastic. You will be able to breathe just as you do now, though swallowing will be a bit stiff at first. In a few months, your own tissues will cover and consume the plastic. You can think of this as an interim framework."

HOW LONG IS THIS GOING TO TAKE? I typed.

"Less than ninety minutes once we get started."

AND THIS WILL BE THE MOST DIFFICULT PART OF LEARNING TO SPEAK?

"This will be the *easiest* part. No, really! The most difficult part was learning to hold your breath."

I cocked my head to one side. KID'S GAME.

"Right, and one that all members of your generation were encouraged to play. You have probably never noticed it, but it is almost impossible for your unenhanced cousins. It is almost as difficult for them to control their breathing as for you to control your heartbeat."

I thought it over and forced myself to overcome a sudden hesitation. WHEN DO WE START?

"Right now. Follow me."

The operating room contained a desk with a standard-looking computer and a plastic-covered operating table surrounded by a dozen multi-jointed mechanical arms. It looked like a torture device for the latest Bond film.

"Robotic surgery," Dr. Torr announced. She seemed equally pleased with the setup and amused by my reaction. "I have already programmed the operation. The table will be able to make smaller incisions and faster sutures than humanly possible. And I will be here to take over if necessary. Which it won't be."

At her direction, I removed my T-shirt and climbed onto the table. One of the arms swung over and sprayed something cold on my throat. Another sprayed something up my nostrils. I sneezed.

"When do I get the anesthetic?" I asked.

"Oh, you already ha—"

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I blinked, looked up at a different ceiling. I felt very relaxed.

"Pan?" Torr's head hung upside down in my field of vision. "Are you awake? Good. Now just lie there and breathe."

I felt I could handle that. Torr's head disappeared. I complied for a timeless time. Then Torr reappeared, her head right side up this time, and helped me to a sitting position.

"Now I want you to take this slowly, Pan."

There was a tray by the side of my bed. On it, a peeled banana and a glass of water. I was suddenly ravenously hungry, but even more thirsty. I brushed her arm aside, grabbed the glass, poured the water down my throat—

—and nearly choked to death. I have never been so scared in all my life. Dr. Torr tried to calm me down, but I could tell that she was afraid my choking would rip open my stitches.

"I thought you understood," she said, when I stopped coughing. "I showed you that you would have a descended larynx. That makes it easier for you to speak and to produce a much wider range of sounds. Unfortunately, it *also* makes it possible for food and drink to go down the wrong way. You are going to have to be careful of that."

She left me to rest then, once she was sure I had not ripped anything open. I lay back and wondered whether this was such a good idea for perhaps a minute before I fell asleep.

Woke up a few hours later, not knowing if it was still day or night, and sipped and nibbled very carefully. Only choked a little. Found myself wondering if this was some sort of hazing initiation, a sort of dues to be paid for the privilege of speech. Torr doesn't seem like that sort of person, but honestly, it makes more sense than the alternative. I mean, if *humans* have had to deal with this for the last million years or so, it's a miracle they aren't all extinct!

Sleep more now.

iv.

March 31, 2034

Nothing much happened today. I am in a room that I guess looks like any hospital room, with servo-bed, holophone, and wallscreen, except for the occasional barking and the smells of the other animals come in to see the vet. I hear that the Progressive Alliance people are still fuming about not being allowed to put me in a human hospital.

I spent the whole day learning to sip and nibble. Torr says this will get easier with time. The biogenerative plastic in my neck is stiffer and slower to respond than real flesh. Once my body consumes and replaces the plastic, everything should be much easier. I can't wait!

God bless Cuss. He brought over my Batman collection. I was about to turn off the wallscreen and dive into the latest issue when two disturbing news items caught my attention. The project to enhance cetacean intelligence has been put on indefinite hold following the death of a baby dolphin and its mother. The body (bodies?) washed up on a Hawaiian beach yesterday. According to the reporter, the enlarged braincase of the baby dolphin apparently caused it to get stuck during delivery. A big mess. A local marine mammal specialist says that the baby drowned, not being able to get its head above the water, and the mother died of internal injuries.

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Cetacean-rights activists charge that the scientists involved in intelligence enhancement have not been taking due care of their charges. The scientists respond that the laws prohibiting the enclosure of dolphins, passed at the insistence of the same activists, made it impossible to maintain a close watch upon the mother. Meanwhile, a third group is carrying placards denouncing all such experimentation as an abomination before the Lord.

As far as I can determine, humans have always been stupid about dolphins. Maybe it's that physiologically imposed grin that makes humans think that dolphins are sweet and cuddly when what they are really thinking about is how to organize a gang rape, or how much they would love to batter a shark to death.

Or maybe it's a kind of envy. Dolphins went all the way back to the sea, forsaking mosquitoes, backaches, and gravity. Humans went only part way, dithered, then decided to stay on the land after all. Maybe they curse themselves for cowards in their dreams.

Still, I wouldn't wish that on anyone. As you know, it has been a lot more difficult for our own enhanced females to give birth for the same reason. "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing, with pain will you give birth to children." It seems the penalty for eating the fruit of that tree is the same for all species.

That story was not the one that disturbed me the most, though. At the corner of the screen was an icon for a related story about chimps. I clicked on it. A reporter's voice said that a chimp operating a forklift for a small business had been found with his head bashed in. Police speculated that it might be a result of union unrest. Their investigation was hampered because it was not clear what crime, if any, had been committed. A law professor explained that killing chimpanzees was not considered murder under Federal or state law. The police chief had wanted to consider it destruction of personal property, but the Intelligence Enhancement Institute, which had placed the chimp in the job, has always maintained that it does not *own* its subjects.

There was an interview with a defensive-looking union steward. "Look, I don't say that any of my guys did this, or that it's right whoever did it, but you gotta understand the pressures on us. All the big companies have already replaced guys like us with robots. The only reason we have *any* jobs is because that sort of automation is too expensive for the smaller operators. So now they hire chimps, lab experiments that don't even belong in this country! Will someone please tell me what *we* are supposed to *do* for a living?"

The pictures of the murder scene were sickening. But what really scared me was that I understood his point. Completely.

v.

April 2, 2034

Today I moved into a suite at the Watergate. I was completely happy at Dr. Torr's, but Suleiman and Elgin were still upset about me being treated "like an animal," so as soon as Torr gave the okay, they sent a ground car to take me and my stuff here. I was worried after seeing the reports on the chimp murder, but everything went smoothly. Even though I drew a few stares in the lobby, the receptionist had apparently been briefed on my arrival. I was checked in and up in my room in less than five minutes.

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The bellhop was a bit perturbed when I pulled my pockets inside out to show him that I have neither cash nor credit cards. "You have an account with the hotel," he informed me. "You can always specify a tip there. If you wish." I tried to indicate that I would. I'm not sure he either understood or believed me.

Very fancy digs. Large fruit plate in the main room, filled with grapes, bananas, apples, and oranges. A chandelier directly above. Classy, but it did not look strong enough to swing on.

I was settled in when the room announced that Dave Morris requested permission to enter. According to Suleiman, Dave Morris was the name of my speech teacher, so I told the room to let him in. All humans are tall, but Morris is tall for a human. And thin. I remembered how Ally had been rough-housing with one of the zoo workers a couple of years ago, all in fun, and had broken his arm by mistake. Humans have bones made of glass.

Dave introduced himself and presented his credentials. They meant nothing to me. Then he slipped a disk in the entertainment center. There was Dave teaching a chimp how to speak. The chimp was having a hard time. I had to laugh. Chimp looked familiar, though. Then there was a jump forward of a year. Now the chimp was in NASA coveralls, fielding questions from reporters, saying how pleased he was to be one of the crew selected to begin construction of the first Lagrange station. The name on the coveralls was Tibbur. My hero!

"My real credentials," Dave said at the end of the disk. "That story and others like them. I can teach you to speak, and to speak well. I'm told you are a good writer. That's good. However, your mouth, your tongue, your lips, your breathing, are not used to doing what we are going to demand they do. I know you've just had an operation to facilitate speech. That will not make this easy. It will make it *possible*."

It wasn't easy. What I still do not understand is how anything so difficult, something that eventually became so painful, could be so boring at the same time. Vowel drills all afternoon. Aaaa, eeeee, ayyyy, ohhhh, youuuu . . . and at the end of the afternoon, two actual words: yes and (you guessed it) no.

"That's it for today," Dave said. "Anymore will just hurt your throat to no purpose."

I signed that I wanted to continue.

"I have to get home anyway," Dave said. "I live in Manassas and want to avoid the rush hour."

That was supposed to be all for today. Part of the reason I wanted Dave to stay was that I was lonely. I hope that doesn't sound silly. As far back as I can remember, I have never been alone before. I started playing around with the entertainment center, found out how to call up my account (I won't tell you what the dollar limit was—I don't believe it myself) and remembered to give the bellhop a tip. There was a special link giving a tipping scale.

Then I called up the entertainment menu and selected a remake of an old movie about a robot that wants to become human and eventually succeeds. It was well-enough done, not that I'm a critic or anything. But the further I got into the story, the more irritated I became. And I got angry with myself because I couldn't figure out *why* I was irritated.

I think now that there were two reasons. First, no robot I have ever known has ever behaved like that. Some are fairly simple, like the ones that

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sweep the walks at the zoo. Others, like the one that gave me a new model throat, are a lot more complex. But I have never met one that wanted to be anything other than what it *was,* much less wanted to be a human.

Okay, you're saying that it's just a story. That's true. What really bothers me is the assumption of the movie people, which they expect their audience to share, that humanity is the summit of creation and that any sentient creature would of course want to be human.

Where do they get this idea? Chimps might like a better deal under human laws, but I don't know a single chimp that would actually want to be human. I sure don't. We're not the ones who get AIDS or Alzheimer's. Even their oh-so-precious dolphins give no indication that they want to be anything other than dolphins. The sheer arrogance of it is astounding!

I don't mean this to read like an anti-human rant. Your writings are full of references to humans you like and respect. I am willing to admit that I have been treated very well by some humans. A few, like Dr. Willis, have become good friends. And a race that can produce gods like Buddy Rich and Tito Puente has nothing to be ashamed of.

But that everyone should want to become hairless, brittle-boned giants? I don't think so.

vi.

April 5, 2034

Practice, practice, practice. Some days my entire face hurts from having to contort my lips into so many unnatural positions. Dave says that I am doing well, though. I have the r and the l sounds down, which he thought might give me trouble. My lisp is pretty much cured. Dave says that it is just a matter of continued attention until it becomes automatic.

April 7, 2034

Hey, this is me, Pan, your chela! How do you like the sound of my voice? Not that I expect anyone to melt down their old Mel Tormé collection, but I think I sound serviceable, if a bit hoarse. Dave says that I am a natural mimic and have an octave musical range.

That's the good news. The bad news is that Dave brought along leaflets. Elgin had sent them to him. I am supposed to read them. Aloud. They're terrible.

"'The evil is not that we treat these poor, subjugated creatures like animals; the evil is that we treat animals as anything less than human.'" I gave Dave a reproachful look. "What does *that* mean?"

"It means they are trying to help you." Dave seemed a bit testy, whether with me or with the drivel he had given me I could not tell.

"Fine!" I said. "I wish they could do a better job. Does this mean that the bugs my mates and I groom out of each other's fur have the same rights you do? Does it mean that I shouldn't eat ants? Or that neither of us should enjoy a hamburger now and then?"

"Don't take it so literally. Political types tend to exaggerate to make a point." He did look a bit worried, though.

"Or how about this? 'After all these centuries of prejudice and hatred, surely we have learned that we are all the same under the skin? If you hurt them, do they not weep? If you prick them—' Who are they calling a prick?"

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"No one. It's a verb. It means to stab or slice or cut somehow."

"Well, let's *say* that. My buddies would bust a gut laughing if they heard me spouting this stuff!"

"Pan, I understand what you are saying. Now listen to me. These people are not only my temporary employers. They are people who have already done you a great favor. As far as I can tell, they want to do even more for you and your fellow chimps. Maybe to you and me they sound silly at times. Maybe they *are* silly at times. You still owe them, not just whatever is in your contract, but some loyalty as well. At least some patience."

And I thought you were the only person who could make me feel bad by being nice to me.

"Okay," I mumbled after a bit. "Let's get back to work."

April 10, 2034

I like to go up on the roof and look over the city. I have been going up after dinner since discovering that the lock to the roof-access door is broken. I go up at dusk since there is less chance of being spotted and having someone repair the lock.

Right next to the hotel is the Kennedy Center and the Potomac. If I look upriver, I can see the spires of Georgetown University, looking like the picture of a castle in an old book. Turning around, I can make out the Lincoln Memorial, and, just beyond the Tidal Basin, the Jefferson Memorial. Both of these names keep coming up in the Progressive Alliance literature, so you could say in a way that I'm doing homework.

Looking directly east, I can see the White House, and, beyond it, the Capitol, brilliant in the setting sun. As it becomes darker, streetlights stretch out like so many intersecting cobwebs. A bit later, stars spread across the sky. There are street noises, and every five minutes there is the roar of a jet taking off or landing at Reagan National. Their landing lights crawl across the sky.

The Washington Monument is the first landmark I learned to recognize. One night, fog blanketed the city and all I could see was the obelisk thrusting up from the dark, the two red lights at the summit blinking like eyes too closely set together. Weird, and very, very cool.

The original idea was to see if I could spot the zoo. I can work out the general direction, but that's all, even when I perch myself on top of the air-handling units.

I try to send messages to Cuss for the whole gang, telling them of my "adventures." I send them via Dr. Willis' e-mail account. Ally occasionally sends a line or two back about what is going on there. They're a good group, but none of them are what you would call literary lions.

April 12, 2034

Dave brought along his favorite DVD to play after our lesson today. "For those of us with this job, the lead character is our hero, our ideal. I'll try to explain about Victorian London as we go along." It took about twenty minutes to adjust to the idea of people spontaneously breaking out in song and dance, but after that, everything was loverly. The story had to do with a professorial type teaching a poor, lower-class woman how to pass as someone with great wealth and social standing.

"Did you like that?" Dave asked when it was over. When I said yes, he said, "Then that's what we'll do tomorrow night."

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I looked at him for a moment. "I won't fetch your slippers," I said, "and that gown would do nothing for me."

"I have a much more modest ambition," he assured me, "but one fully in line with the policies of our employer. It will be fun."

We will see.

vii.

April 13, 2034

The evening was almost a complete bust. Dave and I took the elevator to the restaurant level and presented ourselves at the entrance. "The name is Morris," Dave told the headwaiter. "Reservations for two."

The headwaiter looked us over. "I am sorry, Monsieur, but pets are not allowed in the Watergate."

We were prepared for this. "I'm hardly a pet, old boy, merely hirsute," I said. "I'm a paying guest. Pan's the name, room 815."

The headwaiter did not miss a beat. "Excuse my mistake, Monsieur, but in that case I am sure you are aware of our policy." He nodded in the direction of a sign informing us that all patrons were required to wear coat and tie. That was Dave's usual mode of attire, but I was just in one of my better jumpsuits.

Dave stuttered, and the color of his face distinctly darkened. "Well, I, uh, heard you have ties for patrons who have forgotten theirs." His voice trailed off, becoming almost inaudible.

The headwaiter nodded sympathetically. "I, too, have heard of this practice at some establishments, but here, alas . . ." He finished with an expressive shrug.

It looked like the entire plan would collapse and we would not even have the satisfaction of being able to plausibly claim that we were victims of bigotry and speciesism.

"You might like to try the bar," the headwaiter suggested. "You can be served off the same menu, and there is no requirement for semi-formal attire."

Dave looked as surprised as I felt. "Uh, thanks," he said. "I think we would like that very much."

We were able to get a table immediately. We also got some surprised stares, but nobody seemed angry or upset. Dave and I agreed to split an order of chicken wings. He asked if I would like anything to drink. The banana daiquiri sounded good, BUT I remembered your warnings against alcohol. The need for control, to maintain our relatively recently acquired reasoning powers.

I guess what I most remembered was how bad I felt the morning after my going away party. I don't think I wrote you about that. . . .

An old lady hobbled over to ask if I was (if I *were*, Dave would insist) a chimpanzee. Pretty much, I allowed. But you don't *look* like a chimp, she said, patting the sides of her head to illustrate the problem. Higher foreheads for more brain space, I explained. Basic to the enhancement project. Causes killer headaches sometimes.

Her husband asked if I could ride a unicycle. I admitted that I can't, but said it looked like fun.

Later, while things were pretty quiet, the bartender came over for a chat.

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A blond girl just out of college. She asked what I wanted as a career, and I told her about the Lagrange construction. Turns out she always watches *Chimps in Space.* She joked that I might become a bartender instead. I pointed out that I could not reach the bottles on the high shelves or the overhead glasses. She looked relieved.

And that was pretty much it. No dramatic confrontations, like in the civil rights marches of the 1960s. No being mistaken for royalty either. I guess I could have come down here a lot earlier instead of hiding in my room.

Dave pronounced himself well-pleased. He said that I should look forward to graduation(!) the day after tomorrow.

viii.

April 15, 2034

The door announced Dave and two visitors it did not recognize. I gave entry permission, and in marched Suleiman and Elgin, with Dave a discreet pace behind.

"Hello, Pan." Elgin held her arm out stiffly. It took a moment to recognize the invitation to a handshake, which I accepted somewhat tentatively. "Mr. Morris says that you have been a star pupil. Tell me what you can do."

I looked over at Dave, who nodded. It was a bit unfair, because it made it look like Dave knew what I was going to do. I'm sure he expected a polite greeting.

"The rine in Spine falls minely on the pline," I said.

Well, *I* thought it was hilarious.

It took a while for things to calm down. Elgin put me through a thorough speech test: vowels, consonants, glottal stops, fricatives . . . the whole bit. Then test readings, from tongue twisters ("Suzy sells sea shells by the sea shore") to political speeches ("We have nothing to fear but fear itself"). I thought I did a fairly good FDR.

At last, she seemed to be satisfied. "You have done well, Mr. Morris." Dave had been watching all of this with a horrified smile frozen on his face. "You will find your completion bonus credited to your account by close of business."

And just like that, Dave was dismissed. No opportunity for good-byes. I suppose I could have trotted over and given him a hug, but I didn't even fully realize what was going on as he gave a short wave from behind Suleiman's shoulder, stepped back to the door, and exited.

I tried to imagine Henry Higgins being shoved aside like that. It was inconceivable.

Suleiman gave a chuckle that sounded as if it came from the depths of a volcano. "Pack your things, Pan. Your work is about to begin."

Everything I had fit nicely into the duffel bag I had taken from the zoo. We entered the elevator, which took us to the roof. For a minute, I was sure that someone had discovered my nightly forays and that I would be denounced and punished.

Then I saw the aircar. It was a little more than twice the size of an ordinary automobile. Rotors in either wing provided lift, and, when swung to the horizontal, thrust. The cabin was circular, looking more like a sitting room than a cockpit. It was the most beautiful piece of machinery I have ever seen.

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My jaw must have been hanging open. Suleiman's laugh seemed to fill the rooftop. Even Elgin allowed herself a smile. Suleiman clapped me on the shoulder and urged me through the hatch. I stumbled through and onto the padded, circular bench. Too quickly for me to panic at the unexpected motions, it adjusted itself to my contours. Elgin took a seat across from me. Suleiman stepped through and commanded the hatch to close. It did so, cutting off all noise from the streets below. He hunched over some instruments set into his side of the table, nodded, and said "Home, Bellerophon." I felt rather than heard the engines rev. Then we lifted, tilted, and swept over the Potomac.

"I don't even have to pilot it," Suleiman said, leaning back and cradling the back of his head in his hands. He grinned as if he had performed some sort of magic trick. From what I have seen on the news magazines, it is illegal to pilot one of these things manually save in emergency situations. It did not seem the right time to make such a comment, however.

"Uh, could you tell me where we're going?" We had been rising steadily, and were now heading due east, out over the Chesapeake Bay.

"We are going to Waldenia," Elgin said. "It's a small island off the coast of New Hampshire. Our home."

I looked back in the direction of Washington. "I thought my job was going to have something to do with politics."

"It will, Pan. But first you will need to be . . . briefed extensively on your role."

"Your voice is a new instrument," Suleiman added. "Dr. Torr gave it to you. Mr. Morris taught how to use it. We will tell you what to—show you what you can do with it."

"We will have privacy," Elgin added. "We won't have news drudges prying about with their long-distance lenses." She squinted at me.

"It will also give us time to learn about *you*. I want to be completely honest, Pan. We nearly decided not to sign you when we learned of your relationship with Gombih. We stayed with you for two reasons. The first is that, apart from Gombih, you fit our parameters perfectly.

"The second reason is that we have come to realize that Gombih is much more influential among the enhanced chimp population than we previously suspected. He has disciples everywhere. Even those who insist they are *not* disciples clearly pay close attention to him. If we are going to do our job and help all your people, we are going to have to pay attention to him as well."

She stared at me intently. I shrugged uneasily.

"Why don't you go talk to him?" I suggested.

A series of expressions flashed across her face, settling quickly into sad resignation. "We have tried to talk to him, Pan. Repeatedly. He refuses to see us. Maybe he feels at a disadvantage because he would have to sign to talk. I don't think he realizes how important we are, or how much we can do to help his aims. A year ago, we asked him to comment on the Simian Images documentary you saw at the zoo. He didn't understand the question. He thought it was about films humans should see; he thought that *Frankenstein* would be the best choice." She laughed bitterly.

"You maintain almost daily contact with him. It is our hope that, among other things, you will be able to convince him of our importance and win him over to our side."

Now although you have said that the teacher often learns from the chela, I have never believed that to mean that the chela calls the shots. Nonetheless, I promised I would do my best.

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(Which is what I am doing now. I think just letting you know everything that happens is the best way for you to learn about the Progressive Alliance Party. Despite what Dave said, I haven't yet made up my mind about them. I know that you are very busy, but I would be interested in anything you have to say about my reports. I will pass it on, or not, as you say.)

"We need his help in convincing the rest of humanity that chimps are people just like us. This is a difficult task, even with the well-educated. Look at the scientific name your species has been given: *Pan troglodytes*! I'm sure I don't have to tell you what a troglodyte is or what it implies about your species."

I nodded. Of course she didn't have to explain. Troglodytes are big, tough guys. Nobody messes with them. Then there's the other part of the nomenclature from which I get my name: Pan. Quite a guy with the ladies, and a good musician to boot.

"There is a great deal we do not understand about Gombih and his teachings," Suleiman interjected. "Frankly, much of what has been published appears to be contradictory and nonsensical. We are hoping that you can explain his philosophy to us."

"That is a big order," I said. "I will try to explain as much as I can." And I will be especially careful to reproduce what I said so that you can correct me if I go wrong.

"We were hoping that your people could exercise their rationality unencumbered by the superstitions of centuries," Elgin said. "You can imagine our disappointment when we learned that Gombih has imported Judeo-Christian mythology up through the story of the Great Flood. I can understand that Gombih wants amicable relations with humans, and one way of ensuring that is to encourage gratitude for saving your species from destruction, but that's—"

"That's not the point of that story," I interrupted. After all, it was *human* screw-ups that had caused the Flood. "The point is power relationships. Before the Flood, humans were vegetarians. Afterward, they were allowed to eat what they had saved from destruction. Including *us*."

The aircar lurched as we hit an air pocket or something. Elgin looked sick. "That is barbaric," she protested.

"I suppose so," I agreed, "but it is what Gombih teaches."

"That suggests that he is teaching an ethic of fear," Suleiman said. "Yet Gombih has been quite aggressive in pushing for chimp civil rights. For example, he insists that chimps never work for less than the minimum wage. That has caused some friction, but at least he won't let you be exploited financially."

I thought back to the story of the murder of the chimp who had operated the forklift. "It would be lots worse if we worked for less. Guys at the bottom of the wage scale are already scared that we're going to take their jobs. They'd be sure of it if we worked below minimum. They would do . . . whatever they *had* to to put an end to it."

Suleiman was looking at me strangely. "He has that low an opinion of humanity?"

"It's not that he's frightened by anything," I said, a bit more loudly than may have been necessary. "Look, I'm just his chela, student, disciple, whatever you want to call it. I don't understand everything the Teacher says, and maybe when I try to explain about him, I mix in my own ideas even without knowing it. Here's the way I see it, and the way I think he sees it.

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Chimps are an endangered species. Everybody knows that. Not everybody appreciates *why*. It's not because some army wants to wipe us out. Not because we have offended the rich and powerful. To the contrary. We are endangered because the poorest people on the poorest continent on Earth want some more farmland to work so that they and their families won't starve. To do that, they have to take our habitat away from us. The only reason native chimps still survive is that the various plagues sweeping Africa have reduced the population pressure for the last half-century. That's not going to last forever."

We were out over the ocean now, heading north. Long rolling waves swept by beneath, looking close enough to touch. Suleiman and Elgin looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"Now, things are different for enhanced chimps. We can make ourselves valuable to humans, by being entertaining, or by doing jobs that aren't that attractive to most humans, which is mostly what I did at the zoo, or by doing jobs that humans think a bit too dangerous, which is what some of the Lagrange construction is. All of this gives us some leverage. But it also makes us a target. We may now be seen as *competition*. Our situation is precarious enough that if even a large minority of humans decide that we are a danger, they will wipe us out."

"You're talking genocide!" Elgin protested. "That's unthinkable!"

"Really?" I asked. "I haven't met any Neanderthals lately."

ix.

April 16, 2034

I fell asleep during the last part of the flight, waking up only when the aircar settled into its hangar/garage. I was pretty much out of it, so I just stumbled through the door that was pointed out to me, dropped into a bed, and slept.

Got up this morning and started exploring. Everybody else seemed to be asleep. I found an automatic kitchen that, after it identified me, provided a good breakfast of coffee, pancakes, and bacon. Afterward, I went back to my room and rummaged through the closet for a jacket. Then I found a door, or rather a set of doors that also resembled an airlock, and went outside.

I nearly went right back in. The wind was strong and *cold*. I pushed my way into it, blinking against a sun glaring at me across a featureless ocean. Looking back, I was surprised to find that the house was built into a small hill. Make the exterior door round, and I would have expected Bilbo Baggins to pop out of it.

I decided to take a quick tour of the island to get some idea of its size. I had to be careful not to trip over small signs set into the grass or bushes at odd intervals. Latin names were printed on them.

Looking to the west, I could see a dark line on the horizon, which might have been land or just a cloud bank. The ground sloped downward in that direction, so I followed it until a sign, this time in English, warned me that the area ahead was covered in several varieties of poison ivy. The carpet of leaves extended most of the way to the water.

I turned and made my way uphill. I was facing into the wind again. It felt as if it was cutting directly through my coat and my skin and gnawing at my bones. Every so often, I came across bushes that seemed to have been

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planted as a wind break. Their tops were sheared off, not at the same height exactly, but along the same ascending line, by the wind.

The island seems to be about a kilometer wide and a bit more than that long. I had been keeping my head hunched over as I battled the wind, so I was startled when the ground fell away to rocks maybe thirty meters below. I stumbled backward, trembling. Then, remembering your Disciplines, I forced myself back to the edge and looked down.

Waves in endless series crashed into the rocks at the base of the cliff. The rocks themselves were a jumble, sticking out at all angles like huge, rotten teeth. Black water smashed itself white, covering the rocks then releasing them again. I watched, fascinated and horrified.

"Pan! Step back from the edge. It can be slippery sometimes."

Gratefully, I stepped back three paces. Elgin had come up behind me. She wore a coat like my own. Her blond hair blew in the wind, making her look like a Norse goddess.

"I'm surprised to find you here. Most of our guests find the drop-off frightening."

"I do, too," I admitted. "That's why I was standing here."

She gave me an odd look, puzzled, critical, appraising.

"Yesterday, you said that you wanted to understand Teacher Gombih. Have you read about the Disciplines?"

Elgin frowned, and, for a moment, I thought that the combined roar of wind and waves had drowned out my words. "Some sort of self-help guidance?" she ventured.

"I suppose you could say that," I said. "It's a set of exercises to increase conscious control over our actions. It teaches us to disregard our instincts."

"That's terrible, Pan." She seemed quite upset. "Gombih is teaching you the sort of alienation that has made humans miserable for millennia."

I shook my head. "Before we were enhanced, we were guided mostly by instinct. Now we can see that instinct isn't enough. We must think about how to present ourselves to humans. Think about our responsibilities to our families and to chimps in general. At the zoo, visitors were sometimes really annoying. You wanted to throw shit at them. But then you realized that that would not be such a good idea, because they would complain to the zoo director, who would come down on you even if he believed your version of events. Or if you and your girl had committed to be a family, you might be tempted by some other babe in the pink. Especially if your girl is pregnant. But your girl wants you to herself, and to be around and help take care of the kid when it arrives. You can lie, but you're likely to get caught. Then you get punished. And if you follow Gombih and think about it, you realize that you would *deserve* to be punished."

"Families are important to you?" she asked.

"Sure," I said.

"But you're just— I mean, where did this idea *come* from? Is Gombih trying to impose one version of human values on you?"

"No," I said. "At least, I don't think so. Gombih says we must find our *own* way, like chimps but not chimps, like humans but not humans."

I was getting more and more uncomfortable with her questions. I know I haven't been the best chela in the world, and you know that I have had problems with some of your teachings from time to time. It seemed unfair to you that *I* was your defender. I was thinking about that so much that I tripped over one of those damn metal markers that I mentioned earlier. I

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managed not to fall, but had to hop on one foot while I held the other ankle. The cold made it hurt all the more.

"What the hell are those things?' I asked.

"Poor Pan," Elgin said. She kept herself from laughing, but only just. "Those markers are to label the endangered species of plant life on this island. It's part of our deal with the EPA. Once aircars became popular, the rich started building houses on mountaintops, on islands, in areas that had previously been unspoiled because they were so remote. It was horrible. The last pristine habitats in the developed world were going to be bulldozed and covered in cement. We were able to get emergency legislation through to protect some of these areas, but we knew that just leaving them vacant would make them tempting prizes, perhaps too tempting to prevent future tampering with the law. So we added a clause allowing selected homesteaders to locate in a few of these areas if they would maintain and protect the endangered species of plants and wildlife. That is why our house is built into the island, and why we have planted poison ivy on the low end of the island to discourage boaters from the mainland. The EPA sends inspectors out every year. You should think of us as caretakers rather than owners."

"Sweet," I said, with sincere admiration.

"Let's go back inside. I'll show you around your new home."

I was glad to go back just because of the cold. Elgin told me that Suleiman was in his study, conversing with folks on the mainland, and, apparently, all over the world. I had been wrong in thinking myself the first one up. Apparently, Suleiman and Elgin had been at work for an hour before I woke.

The house is a lot larger than I had guessed. We entered through the "airlock" (which I later learned is actually called a mud room) and went down the hallway. Instead of taking the door to the kitchen, we kept walking to the door at the end. Elgin opened it, and we found ourselves in the garage that I dimly remembered from last night.

"Enough space for twelve aircars at a time," Elgin said. "We have small conferences here from time to time."

Leaving the garage by a different door, we came into a large entertainment room shaped roughly like a slice of pie. Horizontal slit windows set into the curved wall gave views of the ocean off the west end of the island. The door at the far end opened on another hallway, which forked after half a dozen paces. The hall to the left led to Elgin and Suleiman's quarters; the one to the right to mine and the other guests.

"Other guests?" I asked.

"None at the moment," she said, "but that will change in the next few days. Some will be other chimps. I hope that won't make you jealous. It's not intended to be a competition. We really want to use all of you."

Jealous? Until that moment, I had not realized how lonely I was. I can't *wait* for the other chimps!

x.

April 17, 2034

There is a whole second level below the one I explored with Elgin yesterday. Approximately half of it is a library. I am allowed access. The other half

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is Suleiman's laboratory. That is generally off limits, except that this morning I had to go in there for a general physical.

"I'm sorry we weren't able to spend more time with you yesterday," Suleiman said as he hooked me to various wires and took blood samples. "Things have begun moving a bit faster than we expected. However, today we can get down to business with you."

While he looked at various graphs and monitors, he asked me questions about my health and the zoo gang and some of my personal habits. I was getting a bit embarrassed, which I guess showed up on some of his instruments.

"No need to get upset, Pan," he said, laughing. "Everything I see just confirms that you are a healthy young male of your species. There is nothing wrong with that. On the contrary, that is just what we need."

Which I guess means that I passed the physical. Then we went upstairs to a large office in his living quarters. Elgin was already deep in a five-way conversation.

I know hologhosts shouldn't make me jumpy. The technology is the same as that used in the higher-end entertainment centers. A three-dimensional image is transmitted over the satellite network to your viewing room, where it may seem that your friends are seated across from you. Only, if the light isn't just right, you can see through them. And their voices seem to be coming from some place other than their mouths. Worst of all, they have absolutely no smell.

Suleiman went forward to join in the meeting. I hung back, taking a seat by the wall. I could tell by the tone of the voices that things were not going well. A man named Roger, with receding, frizzy blond hair, was denouncing "bastards who changed their votes." It took me a few minutes to realize that he was talking about both the Congress and the United Nations.

"Votes are irrelevant," a woman said. I later heard someone address her as Charlene. "The governments would be incapable of acting quickly enough even if they were honest. Maybe *especially* if they were honest. There have already been sporadic outbreaks of violence. We have been trying to play up the picture of the enhanced chimps and dolphins as victims, but that image will be blurred if they retaliate, as some of them are starting to. Our control of the news media is far from complete. Unfavorable stories will leak out and be exaggerated despite all our best efforts. We must reassert control before it is too late."

"That assumes we ever had control in the *first* place." This third speaker looked oriental, and spoke so precisely that, to my ears at least, he had no accent at all. "You are forgetting a major bloc of players. The chimps act in their own self-interest, but since the chimps are not united, that self-interest manifests itself in a dozen different, and often self-contradictory, ways. Untraceable internet messages from a chimp grandiloquently named Kong have appeared at stations manned by chimps all over the world."

"Those messages are frauds, Lee, the creations of Humanity First fanatics!" Charlene charged.

"Our analysis of their semantic content indicates the contrary," Lee said calmly. "Even if true, the fact that they are being *sent* to chimps indicates that their creator, chimp or not, expects them to have an effect. There is some reason to believe that he is succeeding. We need something to counter that effect."

"I think we have that something," Elgin said. "I've told you about Pan—"

"Yes," Roger interrupted. "We know all about what little Pan is there for."

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He snickered. I found myself getting angry, but more than that, I was confused. Why should he laugh at me? We had never even met!

"You know *nothing!*—" It was as if an explosion had gone off. I jerked away, even though I was in the back of the room and Elgin was facing away from me. The other hologhosts flinched. Roger scowled, but said nothing.

"Pan is a disciple, his word is chela, of an enhanced chimpanzee named Gombih. Gombih seems to function as part philosopher, part prophet. I have been asking Pan about Gombih's position on many of the issues we have been discussing. I think you should hear the answers." She gestured to me.

"Pan. Come up to the table and take a seat."

I did so reluctantly. The hologhosts stared at me silently. Up this close, the lack of odor was especially disturbing.

"Pan has been explaining to me that Gombih is committed to nonviolence."

"Indeed?" Lee asked. "Just what is the strength of this commitment?"

I forced myself to look into the hologhost's eyes. "Seven times never kill man. He teaches that to all of us. He comes back to it again and again."

Charlene frowned. "It's awkwardly phrased, isn't it? Why does he say it that way?"

"It comes from a poem called 'The Law of the Jungle.' Wolves supposedly teach it to their cubs."

This seemed to make her even angrier. "And why do they teach this to their cubs?"

I started to grin despite myself. "Two reasons are given in the story that goes with the poem. The reason the wolves give is that Man is so puny and defenseless that it is dishonorable to hunt him. The *real* reason, though, is that if humans are killed, men come with guns and everyone in the jungle suffers."

"So the great Gombih steals his wisdom from children's books!" Charlene said incredulously. "Why is that?"

I surprised myself (and will probably surprise you, too) by finding that I knew the answer to her question. "There was once a man named Josephus who wrote a book titled *Antiquities of the Jews.* He says that before the Fall of Man, as the story is told in Genesis, humans could talk to the animals. Gombih says he doesn't know if this is true or not, but the reason the story is told is because so many people *wish* it were true. That is why every human culture has stories about talking animals. And, finally, that is the reason for the Enhancement Project. People, some people at least, believe they can bring back Eden through genetic manipulation."

There was a second or two of very scary silence. Then Roger erupted in laughter.

"This Gombih is a sharp one all right! Sharper by far than the majority of our allies!"

"We should not be harsh with our friends," Suleiman began, "just because—"

"Just because they never outgrew their need for Winnie the Pooh! This is really too much!"

I don't like Roger, but at least he realizes that chimps are not Winnie the Pooh or Water Rat or the Bandar-log monkey people. I wonder if he knows that we are not just smaller versions of humans as well?

Elgin was trembling with anger. "Thank you for your help, Pan. You may leave now."

I did, gladly.

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xi.

April 18, 2034

Today, I began what I guess will be my standard schedule for some time to come. Vocal drills with Suleiman begin after breakfast. He isn't as good as Dave, but I think I will make progress anyway. He is having me give speeches to hologhost programs, to get me used to speaking before crowds. There is a little disagreement on the right approach: he thinks I don't take it seriously enough; I think his delivery is stiff.

Then Elgin gave me her "intelligence briefing." This consisted of short biographies of the president and his most important, for our purposes at least, staff members. Lots of brute memorization. This would be really tough except that Elgin knows the most interesting dirt on every one of them. Tomorrow we start on Congressional leaders.

I got a mid-afternoon break, so I went exploring by the cliffs. Nearly killed myself. It rained during the morning, and the rocks were still wet and scummy. I was trying to find a path along the cliff face from one side of the island to the other. I knew it was kind of dumb. I was just tired of being cooped up in an underground house, and wanted to stretch arms and legs and get some exercise to clear away the mental fog brought on by too much studying.

Anyway, it went well at first. Then I misjudged a jump, slipped, banged a knee hard, rolled and slid, and suddenly found myself looking twenty meters straight down. I lay very still for three or four minutes, and then very slowly, without getting up, pushed myself back from the edge. When I trusted my knee not to give out on me, I stood up. I was still breathing heavily. And shivering, not just from the cold. Then, very, very carefully, I climbed back to the top of the cliffs.

That was how I missed the arrival of the aircar. I was walking back to the house, looking forward to a couple quiet hours on the bed reading Batman. Suddenly, an aircar popped straight out of the ground, rose about fifty meters, and headed west. At first, I thought that Elgin or Suleiman was going somewhere, but then I noticed that the model was different from the one that had brought me from Washington.

I started warming up as soon as I stepped into the airlock/mudroom. The hallway was empty. At my door, I raised my hand but stopped before pressing it to the palm panel. Something was . . . not wrong exactly, but odd. There was the trace of a scent. I knew I should recognize it.

"You must be Pan."

I turned. The speaker had just emerged from the room across from mine.

"My name is Lilly." A girl. An enhanced chimp like myself.

"Uh, hi!" I held out my right hand, the way humans do. She took it and pulled me close, patting my back with her left hand and pressing her cheek against mine. I have been with humans for so long (is it really only a month?) that for an instant I'd forgotten how chimps greet each other.

"I guess you just arrived in the aircar?"

Lilly nodded. "They say there may be as many as a dozen of us here eventually."

"That will be great. I'm the only one, the only chimp, here so far. Except for you, of course." I was having to deal with a major case of fumblemouth. If I kept on babbling, Lilly would come to the conclusion that Enhancement hadn't really taken in my case.

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"Where did they get you?" That sounded wrong, but I plowed on. "My previous job was at the National Zoo in Washington."

"I was down at Universal Studios in Florida," Lilly said. "Had a minor role in *Secret Chimp.* Maybe you've seen me?"

"Uh, probably not. I don't watch the vids that much. I have heard about it though."

I don't know if *Secret Chimp* is shown in your part of the world. It's a pretty successful comedy set in a world where chimps are the dominant species and humans are undergoing Enhancement to see if they can ever be made good for something. It does well in the ratings even though some groups, like the Humanity Firsters, say that it's terribly offensive.

"That's okay," She shrugged. "It's just a bit part, really, hardly more than being an extra. And it's boring, y'know? Memorizing lines and movements and having to act on a blank stage against sets that haven't yet been generated by the computers. Shit, sometimes the *actors* who're supposed to be in the same scene with you are in the can themselves, and you have to react against monitor cues."

I nodded, not entirely sure what she meant. "If you're settled in, maybe we can get a bite to eat."

I led the way to the kitchen. No one else was present. "You have met Suleiman and Elgin, haven't you?" I asked as I instructed the autokitchen to provide us with steak sandwiches, potato chips, and mugs of hot apple cider. "I'm surprised they aren't here."

Lilly tossed her head. "They met me in the garage and helped me get my things to the room. Then their pocket phones started buzzing and they said something about a videocon they had to attend in five minutes and they rushed off. I was working up the nerve to go exploring when you showed up."

As soon as we finished eating, I took the hint and showed her around the complex. The door to Suleiman's private quarters was locked, confirming Lilly's story that he and Elgin were talking to Roger and Charlene and Lee or some other group of contacts.

We ended up back at her room. For the first time, she seemed hesitant, almost embarrassed.

"Look, Pan, I don't want you to get the idea that I don't wash on a regular basis, because I do. But even when you do, it's no substitute for grooming. Most humans don't seem to have a clue about that. So could you, y'know . . ."

"Sure," I said, "but only if you promise to groom me as well."

xii.

April 22, 2034

I don't want to write this. I am probably going to be bounced out of here in a matter of hours. If I'm lucky, I may get my job at the zoo back.

Things had been going so well! I was getting high marks from Elgin on her intelligence briefing quizzes, and from Suleiman on my speaking skills. In fact, the last two days I have been in videocons with Progressive Alliance members and allies, going through versions of speeches that I will later give to nationwide audiences. When I finish, everybody gets to be a critic, whether of the delivery (mine) or the text (Elgin's). I got to join in the game myself.

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"I'm having trouble with this Brotherhood of Sophonts business," I said after one reading.

One of the hologhosts in the link, a Cambridge University professor named Clive, nodded sympathetically. "It doesn't exactly roll off the tongue," he agreed, "and most of the audience won't understand the word."

"They can utilize the videoscreen thesaurus function," Elgin said, irritated.

"Of course they *can*," Clive said. "They just never *do*."

Things were getting a bit uncomfortable. "Ah, that's not quite my point."

Everyone looked at me. "Indeed?" Clive said. "What *is* your point?"

I squirmed a bit. "I say three or four times that chimps are just the same as humans. In other places, the implication is that the difference between chimps and humans is no greater than that between Caucasians and blacks, or Jews and Christians. That is a really hard sell, because it is so obviously not *true*."

Clive and Elgin exchanged Significant Looks. "Really?" Clive asked, still looking at Elgin instead of me. "What do you think you should be saying instead?"

"We should lean on the diversity argument," I said. "Accept the fact that chimps and humans are fundamentally different, but that we can be useful to each other. We can use examples from the entertainment industry, the service sector, the high orbitals."

Suleiman frowned. "Most of those jobs are ones that humans don't want or that are considered too dangerous."

"I suppose," I said, shrugging.

"Is that all you want for your people?" he asked. "My grandfather would have called that Tomism. Do you know what that is?"

I nodded. "Dr. Suleiman, with all respect, all your grandfather had to worry about was the occasional lynching. I am concerned about racial survival. Since leaving the zoo, I've been paying a lot more attention to world events than I ever used to. I see that there are a lot of people in this country and elsewhere who don't like chimps. Every day there seems to be another protest or attack, or even a murder."

"Which is what we are trying to protect you from," Clive said.

"Yes, sir, I appreciate that. But most of the people doing those things are on the economic bottom rung. I know there are ministers in the Humanity First movement saying that we are abominations, but from what I see, that is their justification, not their motivation. The motivation is *fear*. Fear that we'll push them off the bottom rung. Fear that they won't be able to feed their families. I don't think we can deal with that by lecturing them, by telling them that they're wrong to be afraid. We have to show them that we are not in competition with them and will not take anything away from them."

"Your compassion for the great unwashed is commendable," Clive said with a dry laugh.

Compassion has nothing to do with it, I thought, frustrated that they seemed so intent on missing the point.

"We'll keep your comments in mind when we prepare the final speeches," Suleiman said.

There's no need to detail the rest of the meeting. I've just been putting off the bad stuff as long as I could. I'll make the rest of it quick.

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Lilly came to me after dinner for our evening grooming session. "Sounds like you made a big impression on the suits today. We should celebrate."

She produced a tightly stoppered black bottle and uncorked it. The fumes themselves were potent.

"I dunno," I said, remembering the stuff Cuss brewed for my going away party and how long it took me to recover from it.

"Nonsense. This stuff is good. And expensive. Here, take just a sip."

I did so, cautiously. It burned my tongue and all the way down my throat. In my stomach, it became a soft explosion of warmth that slowly spread out to my fingertips.

"Wow."

"Told you so," Lilly said, smiling. "Now get to work before you get too relaxed."

I took my regular position behind her and started grooming. Lilly is right when she says that humans are clueless about grooming. They see it as only a cleaning ritual, and it is true that even with human plumbing available, you can't get rid of all the creatures seeking to colonize your fur without using the type of soap that cracks your skin and makes you smell like a hospital ward. But it's a lot more than that. It's calming. It reminds you that you are part of the group. A human whose name I have forgotten once said that a chimp by himself is hardly a chimp at all. I resented the statement at the time, but more and more, I have to admit that there's a lot of truth to it.

Lilly pressed herself back against me as I teased apart and stroked the hairs, and gently massaged her muscles. She smelled different, yet in a way I thought I should recognize.

She turned her head and nibbled gently on the back of my hand. "Pan," she murmured, "I'm pink!"

Her hands reached back and down and—

Well, you know what we did.

I just deleted a line where I said that the drink was drugged and that I couldn't help myself. That would be just an excuse. I don't know if there was anything more than alcohol in the bottle. I could have refused it. And even after I drank, I could have remembered your teachings and controlled myself. I just chose not to.

It's not like I ever considered a family commitment with Lilly. The truth is, I don't really like her that much. She doesn't seem to like much of anything. All her co-workers on *Secret Chimp* were cheats and suck-ups. The only way to get ahead was through favoritism; talent had nothing to do with it. When I asked if she had ever heard of you, she said she doesn't pay attention to stupid philosophy.

So if she gets pregnant, I guess I pay the child fee until she finds a mate.

It was so weird, though. When we were done, I thought we would talk things over a bit. Instead, she stood up abruptly and ran out of the room. I just sat staring as I heard her feet pad down the corridor. Then I got up and went into the shower. I wondered if she had gone to Elgin and Suleiman to accuse me of rape.

For four hours, I have been waiting for the angry footsteps, the sharp knock on the door. Nothing. Absolute silence.

What is going on?

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xiii.

April 23, 2034

I really don't know what's happening here. The roar of an aircar taking off woke me up early this morning. Lilly's door was open and her room empty. I went into the kitchen, too nervous to do more than nibble at toast. There was a note from Suleiman. He and Elgin would be busy all day. Things were going very well. He had underlined "very." I could have the day off.

I walked out by the cliffs. Clouds scudded by quickly overhead. A series of showers swept over the island, each lasting less than a minute. For a while I stared down at the sharp, wet rocks. Then the chill drove me back inside.

Here's the thing. Either Suleiman and Elgin care about what we did last night, or they don't. Lots of humans wouldn't care. But if they *don't,* why is Lilly gone? The timing can't be a coincidence. But if they're upset with Lilly, they should be at least as upset with me. Suleiman, though, writes that everything is going very well.

For the first time, I wonder if anything I am being told is true.

xiv.

April 24, 2034

This will be my last message to you. If all goes according to plan, you will see me in a few days when I present myself for judgment.

Yesterday, I went through the regular routine with Suleiman, speaking lessons and the intelligence briefing. Elgin was nowhere to be seen. Suleiman said she wasn't feeling well, but should be up and about in a day or so. It was hard to concentrate. I wanted to ask about Lilly, but didn't dare. I think Suleiman could tell, but he didn't say anything

Today started out the same. Suleiman disappeared after lunch. I went outside to see if there was any place on the island still worth exploring. It was a bright day, despite a cold, blustery wind. Light filled the sky, flashed off the waves, nearly forced my eyes shut with its intensity. The wind roared in my ears.

That was probably the reason I didn't notice Elgin until she was only a few yards away. I think I told you about the day she looked like a Norse goddess. Today, with the widest smile I have ever seen, she looked like a piece of the Sun itself. Her scent, blown to me on the wind, was changed in a way I could not recognize.

"We've won, Pan," she said. "We've succeeded."

I cocked my head, wondering what she meant.

"I'm pregnant, Pan."

I blinked at the apparent non sequitur. "Uh, congratulations. And to Dr. Suleiman."

"And to *you,* too, Pan." She paused, waiting for a reaction. I had no idea what she wanted. "After all, *you* are the father."

The roaring increased. "No." I could hardly hear my own voice. My head began to throb.

She nodded happily. "Yes, Pan! Remember how nearly identical our DNA sequences are? Almost a decade ago, I realized that the differences were trivial, that we were just different varieties of the same species. But I had to *prove* it." She smiled radiantly.

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"We looked for the healthiest specimen we could find, the one whose genes promised a healthy offspring. That was you. At first, we thought it would be easy to get a semen sample. Then we discovered that you were Gombih's disciple, and that Gombih had instilled a whole series of sexual taboos in you, including a prohibition against masturbation. We would have dropped you right there, except that you were genetically so perfect." She smiled again.

"So we played a little trick on you. We brought in a professional, Lilly, and provided her with a female condom. That worked perfectly. Then Sully had to make sure the egg I provided was fertilized and implant it. Only this morning could we be sure we'd succeeded." I stared in horror.

"Do you understand how important this is?" she asked excitedly. "Showing that you can breed with us proves that we really *are* members of the same species. You cannot be considered property any more. You are entitled to all the legal protections that any human being has."

She must have noticed that my chest and shoulders were heaving. "Why. Pan, you're crying!"

Chimps can't weep. We never took that half-step back to the ocean, never had to evolve that particular mechanism to dump excess salt.

"There, there, Pan." She put an arm around me.

"So good," I said. I was choking out the words and she may not have been able to understand them. "You have both been so good to me . . ."

My arms went up around her neck, her throat cool against my palms. *Bones like glass.* The neck broke with a single snap. She collapsed against me without a sound.

I felt as much on autopilot as the skycar. I lifted her feather-light body, carried her to the cliff, and opened my hands. She fell and bounced and fell again.

I ran back to the house, slammed open the inner and outer doors, and loped down the hallway, screaming for Suleiman. He stuck his head out a door.

"What—?"

"It's Dr. Elgin," I gasped. "We were near the cliffs and she slipped and now she's not moving—"

Suleiman hurried after me, shrugging into a jacket as he ran. We came to the edge of the cliff and I pointed. He craned his neck, and it was so easy as he leaned over just to *push,* so that the whole body would lean out further and topple to the rocks below.

My only fear was that he might land on a ledge and be hurt but not killed. What would I do if he pled for help?

But that didn't happen.

Back in the house, I found Suleiman's laboratory unlocked. The data screen at his desk documented Elgin's physical condition. I tried to read it, struggling with the technical jargon, the passive tenses. "The fertilized egg was then inserted in the subject. It has descended the fallopian tube and lodged itself successfully in the womb. The beginnings of a placenta are distinctly discernible. . . ."

I wiped the back-up disk and reformatted the hard disk. I know that this does not erase all knowledge of the experiment. I realize now why Roger was smirking at me. He knew. They all knew.

At some point, after people have not heard from Suleiman or Elgin, they

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will fly out to investigate. I might be able to convince the police that it was a murder/suicide. Surely, when they understood what Suleiman and Elgin were doing, there would be many humans who would find that reaction plausible. Then again, I might not be able to carry it off. Then all the Humanity Firsters would point to me as proof of their paranoia. All your good work would be undone.

I have examined the skycar and the fueling facilities in the garage. There is even an "Auto-piloting for Dummies" tutorial available on the pilot's console. If I'm working the figures right, I have just enough fuel to reach your compound.

So this is my last message. As soon as I send this, I will open the garage ceiling, set the auto-pilot, and be on my way. With luck, in less than a day I will present myself to you for your judgment.

I don't envy your task.

I have been thinking it over. What I did was wrong, but I can't say that I am sorry. No, even that's not true. I am sorry that I have disappointed *you*. To think that you once called me your favorite chela. And I am sorry about the baby. It wasn't its fault that it would be—whatever it would have become.

But tell me, teacher, who the hell are these people who give us bigger skulls, so that our mothers may tear themselves up in childbirth, who cut our throats, so that we may speak like them, and who now want to demonstrate that we are merely smaller, hairier, inferior versions of themselves? Are we just clay to be molded into whatever form amuses them? Does the whole universe exist merely to mirror their sentimentality?

"What we shall be later has not yet come to light." So you taught me. Whatever we become, it must be something more than animations of a children's story. We must become more deeply *ourselves*. Then they will know us, and perhaps then, for the first time, we will know ourselves. ○

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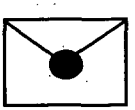

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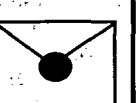

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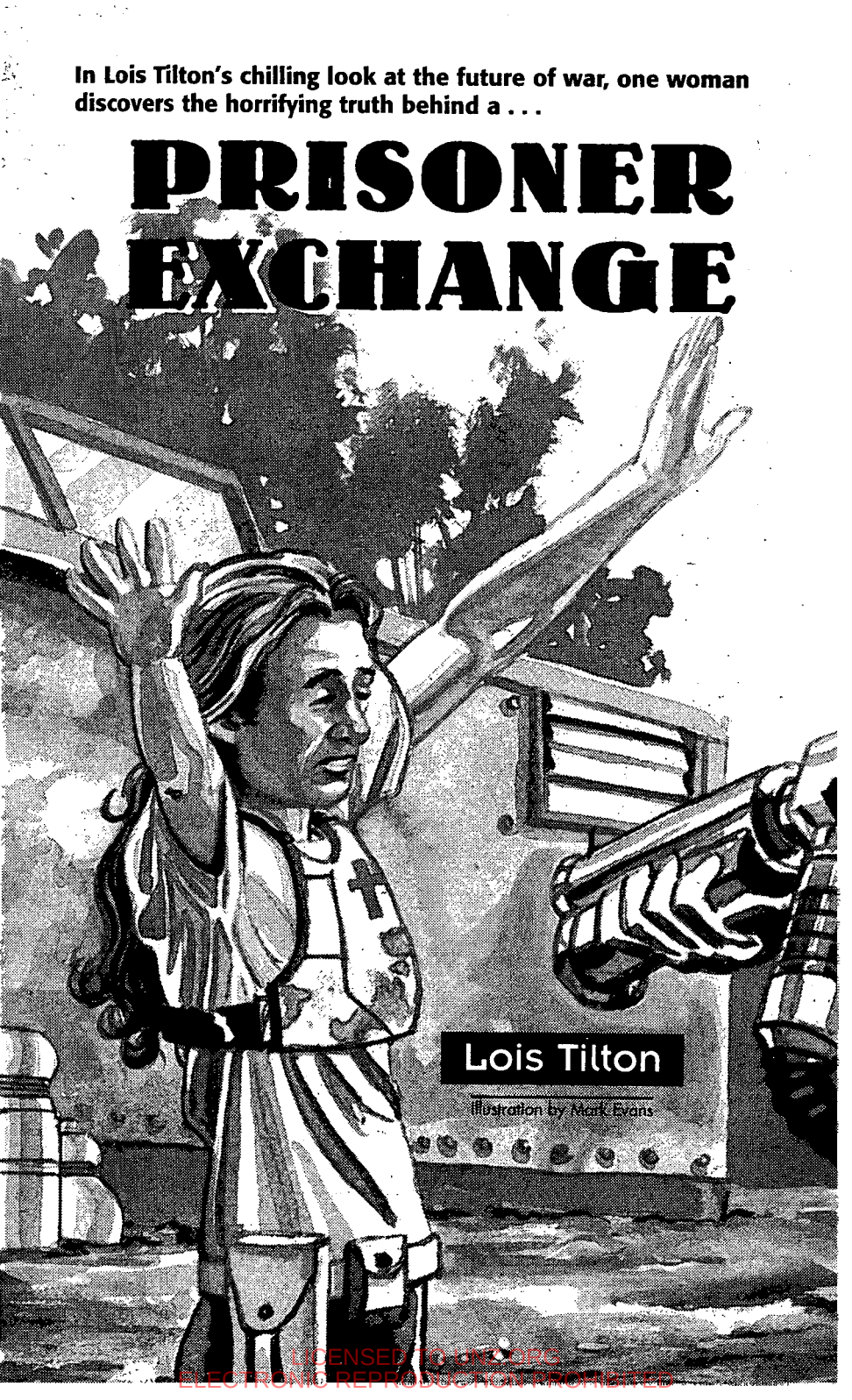
PRISONER EXCHANGE



Lois Tilton

Illustration by Mark Evans

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(INet) There are reports from the Confederation that an unknown number of Republic Nord POWs were blinded in retaliation for the flashbombing of Confederation forces during the ongoing border war between the two nations. As many as two thousand Republic troops may have been captured when their counteroffensive at Port Haven failed.

Commissioners of the International Congress are investigating a possible violation of the International Accords.

In fact, there were just about seventeen hundred of us. Those were the figures we got from the IC commissioners when they finally came to implement the prisoner exchange. They estimated our strike force had suffered over 90 percent casualties in the course of the six-week peninsular campaign. Our government, of course, refuses to confirm the numbers.

The strike force was overextended, the way it had been for the whole war: our generals pushing too fast, too far, because they counted on having the best equipment, the most advanced weapons. But the Confederation always had more troops to put on the ground, always. After our fallback position at Port Haven was overrun, the lifters couldn't even get in.

We were an evac station, but toward the end they were only bringing us the most serious cases. Any troops who could still handle a weapon were being treated in the field and held there to maintain their positions. Holding out—it was all we could do by then. Still, the wounded kept coming into the station, they kept bringing them to us: bodies so badly torn and bloody and burned. We got them sedated and onto life-support, into the transport capsules where they lay cased like mummies, ready to be flown out, waiting for airlift.

But the lifters weren't getting through anymore. Casualties piled up until we finally had to lay them down on the floor out in the transport ward. We were running short of room, of everything—plasma, drugs, especially the life-support capsules.

"We have to be realistic," the Chief Surgeon finally said. "How many of these patients are really going to have a chance in a Confederation hospital?" Saying out loud what we all knew: none of them—none of us—were going to end up in one of our own hospitals. And the Confederation medical facilities aren't anywhere as advanced as our own.

We were still counting on the Accords, then. Still expecting the Confederation to take care of our wounded, as we would have treated Confederation prisoners if any of them had been brought into the station, if the battle had gone the other way.

"I'm not sure about this, Millet," MT Coron protested. "Who are we to play god, to choose who's going to live and who's going to die?"

I defended the chief's position. "This is just like triage in the field. We can't always save everyone, we have to choose the ones who have the best chance to survive."

And we knew that the capsules were never intended for long-term support, just to keep casualties alive while they were evacuated back to the base hospitals. For some of them, we knew, it was already too late. Even too late to save their bodies for the transplant donor wards.

But I still felt like a murderer the first time I switched off the power to a capsule and saw the vital signs on the readout fall into black. When I looked

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into a boy's face as I was pulling the heart catheter out of his chest and recognized him: I'd put him onto the regulator myself, just six days ago—started his heart going again. But it had been too long, and now someone else needed the equipment, someone with a better chance to live.

But no matter how hard we worked, we couldn't push the war back. It kept coming closer, until finally the chief called us all together again, the whole staff, technicians and surgeons. She looked awful, with a tremor in her hands and her eyes bloodshot. It was the stimulants—we were all taking them, it was the only way to keep going. Sometimes I would just stop in the middle of a procedure and burst out crying, from raw exhaustion. I wasn't the only one.

"I've just heard from Divisional Command," she announced. "They can't hold any longer. It's only a matter of hours now. I want everyone to be ready. Pack a bag full of basic supplies, make sure it's close at hand at all times. Keep some emergency items in your pockets, too," she added, "or a waist pack. Just in case."

During the last couple of hours, a few field medics straggled in with wounded soldiers, finally withdrawing from their positions. We spent the time setting broken bones and suturing flesh, shielding our eyes from the flash of bombs going off overhead. Until a concussion rocked the station, blowing in the doors of the operating room.

The blast knocked me to my knees, and, from the ground, I saw the enemy troops rushing in, more than a dozen armed men. I could see them screaming at us, screaming orders, but all I could hear was the ringing of the blast inside my ears, and I couldn't make out what they were saying. Their helmet visors covered their faces, their eyes. One of them kicked me to make me stand up, and when I didn't get right away to my feet, he drove the butt of his weapon into my ribs.

They were gathering us together, all the medics and the walking wounded, shoving us toward the door. But there were still two men lying unconscious on the operating tables, and the chief was arguing with the Confederation troops, protesting in words I still couldn't make out, but I knew what she was saying, that she couldn't leave and abandon them there, helpless.

Until the Confederate officer brushed the others aside, swung up his weapon and fired. The burst ripped through the chief and into the operating tables behind her. Blood sprayed, sparks spat, and an instant later an oxygen canister exploded into a fireball.

"Out! Out!" They drove us at gunpoint through the doors ahead of the blaze and out to the transport pad, where they stripped us, searched us, taking everything, not just medical supplies. They threw personal items and family pictures onto the pavement, stomping on them with their boots, laughing, while we lay face-down with our hands secured behind our backs, wondering, *Are they going to shoot us now, here? The wounded? The medics? Men and women both? What about the Accords?*

While the flames spread rapidly through the station. The acrid smoke burned my eyes and the back of my throat, and tears ran down my face, uncontrollable, as I thought of all our patients, all the men in the transport capsules, so helpless, burning to death. I wanted to run back to save them, get them out of there, but none of us dared move with the guns pointing at us, remembering what had happened to the chief. I tried to tell myself that the men in the capsules were under heavy sedation. *They won't feel anything. They'll never know what's happening.*

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I hope I was right. I couldn't do anything to help them. I hope no one else was in there, trapped in the fire. I'll never know.

Seventeen hundred of us ended up in the Confederation POW cage.

No one had any idea what they were going to do. After what had happened at the medical station, we expected the worst. But they herded us into the enclosure and left us there behind the deadline, and that was it, except that every day a truckload of prisoners was driven away. "For processing."

It was all they would tell us. No one thought too much about it. The cage was only a temporary holding pen, we assumed, just a bare piece of ground. There was no distinction made between men and women, between wounded and unwounded. There was no hospitalization or medical treatment for the wounded. The worst cases, the ones who couldn't walk, hadn't made it so far as the cage. We medics did what we could for them, but the Confederation hadn't left us anything to work with—no drugs, no supplies. We were starting to worry about infection.

After a day or so, a few of us approached the guards. It was hard to go up to them. We were afraid. I kept seeing in my mind the casual way the Confederation officer at the evac station had just swept up his weapon and fired at the chief, making her body burst into a spray of blood. There was no guarantee of safety just because I was a medic, or a woman.

Unlike the Confederation troops in the field, the guards at the cage didn't have visors covering their faces. Their eyes were dark, and they narrowed when they saw us coming. They turned their guns on us. They cursed "Let the fuckers rot!" when we told them we wanted medical supplies to help the wounded troops.

"What about the Accords?" I dared to demand.

"Fuck the Accords! Where were the Accords at Port Haven?"

"What are they talking about?" I wondered in a whisper to MO Ault, standing closest to me. What had happened at Port Haven?

He shook his head slightly and whispered, "Enemy propaganda, that's all. Don't believe their lies."

I wondered about that, but it was no place to ask questions. We backed away, empty-handed and lucky not to be shot.

A few days later, I was taken for "processing." The guards picked us out when we had to line up for the daily distribution of field rations. There was no selection in it, they just counted off the closest fifty of us and marched us into a personnel transport truck.

We were nervous, of course. "Does anyone know what this is all about?" someone asked.

"Processing" suddenly sounded ominous. We knew it could mean questioning. Interrogation. Torture? No one was sure, no one could say it wasn't so. The Accords prohibited torture of POWs—but they also prohibited the murder of medics and wounded patients in hospitals.

An officer started to recite the Code of Military Conduct, the section on the behavior expected of prisoners. We were supposed to resist, not to give information to the enemy. I was glad I was just a medic, that I didn't have any information to give them. But what if they didn't believe me?

It was rape in my mind more than anything else, I think. No women had been molested while we were held in the cage, but I knew interrogators liked to use rape to break female prisoners. It was part of our medical train-

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ing, how to treat torture victims, victims of violent rape. There were pictures—I was wishing I hadn't seen them.

They took us away, one at a time. I'd been rehearsing the statement I'd been planning to make, what the Code allowed me to say, but there was no interrogation, no questions. They didn't even ask my name.

They strapped me into a treatment chair, the kind with clamps to hold the head motionless. I wondered if it was maybe a retinal camera they were using, to take prints for ID. Then I saw them pulling face shields down to cover their eyes.

Blinding, burning flare of light—it was over before I could take breath to scream.

Seventeen hundred of us blinded. It was retribution, they told us. Payback for their troops blinded by our weapons, the flashbombs the Republic used against the Confederation garrison at Port Haven.

The helplessness was the worst part of it, after the initial pain. To stumble, groping, tripping over obstructions I couldn't see. The darkness seemed to close in around me, like a looming, invisible presence. Worse, I couldn't keep my balance, I couldn't take a step without feeling that the ground was falling away under my feet. I kept walking into walls, into barriers, but when I groped for them, nothing was there in front of me.

The Confederation put us on exhibition. They wanted their people to see us, to witness the revenge they'd taken on the enemy. To laugh at us. I could hear them laughing, mocking us whenever we stumbled and fell, or walked into the obstacles they placed in our path.

They threw things at us, too, when we couldn't tell where they were coming from, they tripped us so we'd go sprawling on the ground, onto our knees, onto our faces. They put filth into our food and laughed when we swallowed what we couldn't see.

I broke my nose and my right cheekbone, walking into invisible walls and barricades I couldn't see. I became afraid to move, even groping with my hands ahead of myself at every step, the way the enemy onlookers found so laughable. I couldn't walk, I couldn't even stand without the ground starting to collapse under my feet, like a sinkhole. I crawled, and when I crawled into a corner, I stayed there, curled up like a trapped animal. I couldn't move.

It served us right, the Confederation guards told us. It was payback, it was justice.

Of course they couldn't keep something like that a secret, not that they really tried. It was too big, there were so many of us. The news got out to the International Congress, to the IC Commission on the Accords.

It got out to our government. The Republic News Service got hold of the recordings and broadcast them nationwide—scenes of blinded Republic troops with huge running wounds where their eyes had been, being tormented by crowds of mocking Confederation citizens. There was a huge public outcry, demonstrations against the Confederation, calls for revenge, for reprisals. There were riots near the camps where Confederation war prisoners were held.

They took one Confederation prisoner—the government did, not the mob—and used him to demonstrate just what they were prepared to do to all their POWs if we weren't released. They broadcast it to the Confederation. I've seen the recording—not until afterward, of course. I wish I never had. It didn't make my own pain any less, to watch the enemy suffer.

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It's a good thing the IC Commissioners intervened before things could go much further. Still, the negotiations were sticky. The Confederation didn't want an even exchange; the Republic was holding ten times the prisoners they were. But international opinion was against them, and we were finally exchanged for an equal number of wounded Confederation POWs.

I'd only been in the hospital for a week when they came to make their offer. The resident surgeon in charge of my case introduced them: a captain from Medical Corps HQ, and a Senior MO, a researcher in "Special Projects."

"We have good news, Medical Technician," the captain announced. "We believe we can give you back your sight."

I was dubious, of course. I knew enough about the research to know we couldn't do whole-eye transplants, not when the optic nerve was damaged. And the Confederation laser had destroyed mine completely, even some of the visual cortex.

That left visual prosthetics, and their state of development wasn't really encouraging. Even with the most advanced microcameras and neural interfaces, the best they could manage was a flat, two-dimensional image, only enough to make out shapes and movement and distance. Of course, that would be better than blindness. I would give anything to have even that much sight back, to have anything but the terrible, enveloping darkness.

"How much sight?" I asked.

The researcher answered me. "We can't give you a firm guarantee. This is a new procedure, it's still in the experimental stage. But we've made new advances in nerve grafting, and we've been able to apply them to the optic nerve. Results in the lab so far have been promising. In your case, this procedure may be the only hope of restoring your vision."

I think I sat up a little straighter in my hospital chair. "You're not talking about an artificial eye? One of those microcameras linked to a chip in my head? You're talking about an eye transplant?"

"That's right. Real eyes, with an optic nerve grafted to your own brain. There's a good chance, if everything goes well, that your vision might be completely restored."

An eye transplant. To see again—to really *see*. To escape from the blackness.

The captain from HQ had to break in at that point. "Of course, this procedure is still experimental," she reminded me. "We're offering you this opportunity, but it's contingent on your agreement to extend your term of service if the operation does restore your sight."

There was always a condition. The military never gave you something without demanding a price. They didn't like to waste their efforts restoring military personnel to working condition, only to lose their services afterward. Even the optical microcameras were designed to interface with targeting computers, so half-blind soldiers could still perform a useful function in the war.

I hesitated. I couldn't endure the prospect of remaining blind for the rest of my life, to live in that darkness. People adjust to it, I know, they learn to live almost-normal lives. But not me. I knew I never could, not after my days crouching in that corner.

Yet blindness wasn't the worst thing I feared. "I don't . . ." I turned my head from one voice to the other, disoriented. Who was I appealing to? "Of

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course I'm willing to serve, but . . . I don't want to go back there. To the combat zone. I'm afraid to be taken prisoner again. I just don't think I could stand it, not after what happened."

For a moment, no reply. Then the captain: "I think that's reasonable, MT Millet. Considering everything that's happened, as you say. We'll have the release forms prepared."

So I signed the forms, not knowing anything more about this new procedure, this experimental technique. In a few more days, surgeons performed the operation which was promised to give me back my sight.

And six weeks later, when they finally removed the bandages, there was light. There was color and motion. I could see!

Not perfectly, not at once. "It's all blurred," I told the medics. "I can't make anything out."

"That's normal. The problem isn't with your eyes, they're functioning perfectly. Your brain just needs to learn to form images again."

And it did, day by day. The world was firm again under my feet and the phantom obstacles gone from my path. Forms appeared, resolved into familiar objects: people, furniture, walls and doors. I ventured outside unassisted and saw the sky, the trees. And in the mirror, the pale-colored oval reflected there became a face. I could make out mouth, nose, and eyes. But was it really my face? What was wrong with my eyes?

Of course, I knew they weren't really my own eyes. My eyes had been burned away by the Confederation laser. But why did they look so dark?

As my vision resolved further over the next few days, I could see that the color was a deep, dark brown, almost black. My own had been gray-green. In the mirror, the rest of my features seemed to disappear behind them, pallid and faded. They weren't my eyes. It wasn't just that they were different, they were *wrong.* I was afraid to look directly into those eyes, afraid to see a stranger's soul staring back at me.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. When I went home on convalescent leave, people kept saying, "I wouldn't have recognized you." I retreated, I started to stay inside in my room, where no one could see me. I lay in bed and cried sometimes until I fell asleep from nervous exhaustion.

People tried to talk me out of it. "After the ordeal you went through, it's natural that you'd have some trouble adjusting. Of course you think you've changed, you're not the same person, but it isn't true. You should get used to the difference after a while."

"You should be grateful you can *see.* You should be grateful to have eyes again!"

I should get over it, they were telling me.

And, of course I knew they were right. I was a medic, I knew what happened to some of the casualties we put into the life-support capsules. They couldn't all be saved, and wasn't it better to use their bodies to help save someone else? This was no different from any other transplant operation: grafting another person's heart, another person's hands. Another person's eyes.

Without them, I'd still be blind. Would I rather be blind, back in that dark corner?

Counselors diagnosed post-traumatic depression and put me on drugs. And I finally learned to avoid mirrors. As long as I couldn't see the eyes, I could pretend they were mine. I could eventually get over it.

* * *

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They did keep their word about not sending me back to the combat zone. When I came back from leave, I was assigned to the same surgical center where they'd replaced my eyes, to work in the transplant donor ward.

As a combat medic, despite all the risks at the front, at least I had the satisfaction of saving lives. For my patients in the donor ward, it was already too late. Yet my actual tasks were similar. I started my rounds every day by checking the vital readouts, much the same as the readouts on the transport capsules. The basic requirements of life-support don't change. You have to keep the essential systems functioning: the blood circulating, the nutrients supplied, the waste products removed.

The ward had the sharp, medicinal scent of disinfectants, of suspension gel. At the front, at the transport station, you couldn't avoid the smell of blood, freshly spilled feces, and singed tissue. In the hospital, when I walked up and down the rows, the impact of my footsteps was the loudest thing I could hear. No bombs going off, no missiles screaming overhead. No surgeons shouting for help: *I've got a bleeder, zap it! Stat!* No wounded soldiers screaming for something to stop the pain.

These patients felt no pain. Not any longer. They all lay cushioned in cooling suspension gel, and a slight electrostimulus kept their muscles from atrophy. Each case was different, of course. They were all fatal casualties, but no two injuries were quite the same. Some had lost vital organs, some had lost limbs. Some were even capable of maintaining a heartbeat, but ward policy was to keep them all on circulation; it was more reliable. The pumps thrummed quietly, the fluids flowed through their tubes, the patients never moved, or sighed, or took a breath.

They never opened their eyes. Their eyes were taped shut.

I went on my daily rounds. I checked the readouts, I adjusted the drug dosages, I replenished and emptied the appropriate reservoirs. I wiped their bodies clean—they were cool to the touch, but there was still a faint flush of blood to their skin, not the livid discoloration you'd find in a corpse. A corpse decomposes, it rots. These bodies weren't corpses. In some cases, I could see that their wounds were actually closing, healing.

But they weren't really alive. It was important to keep remembering the fact. Several times a day, orderlies would come into the ward, and I'd help them transfer the bodies to a transport unit before they were taken away to the surgical units. Often, several hours later, they were returned—what was left of them was returned. Then I'd have to settle them into their gel beds again, restoring their life-support until the readouts all indicated equilibrium.

I wondered about this. "I thought all the organs from each donor were usually harvested at once," I asked my ward supervisor.

"Usually. But sometimes there's a unusual level of demand—eyes, for instance."

"I see." I felt my face heat with embarrassment, that I'd asked. That I hadn't known, hadn't realized it before. But it was excusable. I was new to the ward, new to this kind of work.

And indeed, the next time a new donor was brought into the ward, I could see a drop of blood-tinged serum leaking from beneath the corner of his eyelids. I gently wiped it away. Beneath the tape, I could see now, they were sunken, closed over empty sockets. The eyes were gone, to give sight to another.

"I'm sorry!" I whispered in a sudden outburst of grief, so grateful to a man I could never thank for what he'd given me.

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That was when it began. When I began to see what I'd overlooked until then, that beneath the tape the eye sockets of every donor in the ward were empty. So many. But there were seventeen hundred of us.

And other things. The files never included the donors' names, only their military ID numbers. This made things easier for the medical staff, the supervisor explained. But in some of the files, the IDs were in a nonstandard format, only a number, as if the officials were trying to conceal their identities. I didn't ask the supervisor to explain this, I didn't act like I'd observed anything unusual at all. I just did my rounds as always. There was no difference in the treatment given to these particular cases, no special instructions for their care.

Yet the donors with the nonregulation ID numbers were physically distinct in some ways from the rest: their skin was usually darker, the hair on their bodies more black and dense than the norm in our population. And the color of their eyes? Were they a deep, dark brown?

There was no way to tell. Their eyes were gone. All their eyes were gone. Seventeen hundred of us. Seventeen hundred of them.

I had to wonder: how many Confederation POWs were in our hospitals with newly transplanted organs? Or were they only used to save Republic lives? Their enemies' lives? The Accords—

Fuck the Accords! After what they'd done to us—shouldn't they be the ones to pay? To give us our eyes back? Wasn't it only justice? That was my first, immediate reaction.

But I couldn't help noticing, as more and more new donors with nonregulation IDs were brought into the ward over the next few months: except for their missing eyes, these cases had fewer visible injuries. Without asking any questions, I began to check the readouts. What could have killed them? Where were the fatal wounds?

A question became a suspicion. I didn't want to believe it. But more and more, the evidence couldn't be denied.

The day my supervisor ordered me into her office, I was nervous. I supposed someone had finally observed what I was doing, paying too much attention to the Confederation donors, to the readouts of their condition, and drawing dangerous conclusions. I was expecting a warning or a reprimand.

Instead, she said, "Millet, we've had orders to expect a large intake of new casualties within the next month. The hospital has decided to open a new donor ward, and I've recommended you for the position of ward supervisor. It'll mean a promotion to Chief MT." She extended her hand. "Congratulations. You deserve it."

I was stunned. I didn't know what to say. *I know what's going on here, I know what you're doing! It's wrong!*

Without intending it, I found myself shaking my head.

"Is something wrong?"

I took a breath. "I'm sorry. I mean, I appreciate the recommendation. But I think . . . I've been thinking . . ." And I groped for a plausible-sounding excuse, something to justify the decision that I'd made before I knew it. "It might be better if I transferred back to the combat zone. The hospital—it's so quiet here. Too quiet, like working in a morgue."

Her voice went cold, and the extended hand turned to a fist. "Of course, that's your decision, MT. I'll put the transfer forms through as soon as possible."

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So now I'm back here at the front, working as a field medic. Back in the middle of the blood and the shit and the screaming. Now I crawl out under fire to drag the wounded to safety; I stabilize their broken bones and spray their burns and try to stop their hemorrhaging; I pump them full of plasma and painkiller and anti-shock, then send them back to the evac station. I do my best to save their lives.

I do the same for the enemy, too, if any of them come into our hands. Some of the troops object. They've heard rumors of atrocities, terrible things done to prisoners of war. You just can't keep that kind of thing a secret. But if they don't like what I'm doing, I just tell them, "It's mandated by the Accords to treat enemy wounded." I try not to think of what might happen to the Confederation casualties once they get back to our hospitals. But I don't know what else I can do.

I try to be careful. I wear body armor under my uniform, and always make sure to keep my visor down to cover my eyes, in case of flashbombs. I take one other precaution: the lethal ampule I keep hanging from this chain around my neck.

A lot of the troops feel the same way. More of them have started to carry the ampules, or a capsule to swallow. I help them. As a medic, I have access to the drugs.

They say the war is going well for us now. We've retaken Port Haven again and made a bridgehead across the strait. That is, if we can believe official reports. But I don't want to take any chances. I don't take this chain off my neck, not as long as I'm out here.

Because I don't ever want to risk being taken prisoner again. I don't want to think what would happen if they looked into my eyes. O

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Lucius Shepard, Allen M. Steele, and Jack Williamson.

Webs of Wonder **September 11 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
David Brin, Julie E. Czerneda, and James Van Pelt talk about SF in the classroom.

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

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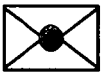
UNREAL MESSAGES?



Just before quitting your e-mail program
On screen in a little panel appears:
"No more unreal messages." Surely "unreal"
Should be "unread" instead. How surreal!
Maybe some virus or cyber-bug gobbled
The half-moon of the "d"? Yet what if it's true?
How many unreal messages have arrived
Without you twigging their unreality? Let's see:

There was the message from Molly, who's dead
To the best of your knowledge. That came
As quite a surprise—maybe ghosts can invade
Machines more easily than they can manifest
Their presence otherwise. Next came the query
From the Vatican, and one from Colonel Gaddafi,
Not to mention the enigmatic communication
From an alien orbiting Saturn currently.

Can it be that you sent those to yourself?
You couldn't abide seeing "No new messages"
So you wrote yourself a few. Oh do be real!
A missive from Gaddafi in Arabic mainly?
Another from Saturn in alien script plainly,
Boxes and squiggles and symbols with tails?
And how about the memo in Italian,
Or long-gone Molly, the lady in limbo?

The machine must have made up messages
Of its own accord! It became self-conscious—
I don't mean embarrassed by recent behavior
Of yours, but endowed with a mind of its own.
Now it has second thoughts, and you caught
It out. Wow, what a disclosure to make
To the world. Now you'll get e-mails galore
From Silicon Valley, Seattle, and Singapore!

—Ian Watson

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A.D. 2380: HOMO SAPIENS DECLARED EXTINCT

Bruce Sterling

Bruce Sterling recently edited the June 2001 issue of *Whole Earth* magazine, which focused on the greenhouse effect. His latest book, *Zeitgeist*, has just been released in paperback by Bantam/Spectra.

This story was first published in the November 1, 1999 issue of *Nature*. Used by permission of the author.

After a painstaking ten-year search, from the Tibetan highlands to the Brazilian rain forests, it's official: there are no more human beings.

"I suppose I have to consider this a personal setback," said anthropologist Dr. Marcia Raymo, of the Institute for Retrograde Study in Berlin. "Of course we still have human tissue in the lab, and we could clone as many specimens of Homo sapiens as we like. But that species was always known primarily for its unique cultural activity."

"I can't understand what the fuss is about," declared Rita "Cuddles" Srinivasan, actress, sex symbol, and computer peripheral. "Artificial Intelligences love to embody themselves in human forms like mine, to wallow in sex and eating. I'm good for oodles of human stuff, scratching, sleeping, sneezing, you can name it. As long as AIs honor their origins, you'll see plenty of disembodied intelligences slumming around in human forms. That's where all the fun is, I promise—trust me."

The actress's current AI sponsor further remarked via wireless telepathy that Miss Srinivasan's occasional extra arms or heads should be seen as a sign of "creative brio," and not as a violation of "some obsolete, supposedly standard human form."

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A worldwide survey of skull contents in April 2379 revealed no living citizen with less than 35 percent cultured gelbrain. "That pretty well kicks it in the head for me," declared statistician Piers Euler, the front identity for a collaborative group-mind of mathematicians at the Bourbaki Academy in Paris. "I don't see how you can declare any entity 'human' when their brain is a gelatin lattice, and every cell of their body contains extensive extra strands of industrial-strength DNA. Not only is humanity extinct, but, strictly speaking, pretty much everyone alive today should be classified as a unique, post-natural, one-of-a-kind species."

"I was born human," admitted 380-year-old classical musician Soon Yi, speaking from his support vat in Shanghai. "I grew up as a human being. It seemed quite natural at the time. For hundreds of years on the state-supported concert circuit, I promoted myself as a 'humanist,' supporting and promoting human high culture. But at this point, I should be honest: that was always my stage pretense. Let's face it: gelbrain is vastly better stuff than those gray, greasy, catch-as-catch-can human neurons. You can't become a serious professional artiste while using nothing but all-natural animal tissue in your head. It's just absurd!"

Gently fanning his wizened tissues with warm currents of support fluid, the grand old man of music continued: "Wolfgang Mozart was a very dull creature by our modern standards, but thanks to gelbrain, I can still find ways to pump life into his primitive compositions. I also persist in finding Bach worthwhile, even in today's ultracivilized milieu, where individual consciousness and creative subjectivity tend to be rather rare, or absent entirely."

Posthumanity's most scientifically advanced group, the pioneer Blood Bathers in their vast crystalline castles in the Oort Cloud, could not be reached for comment.

"Why trouble the highly prestigious Blood Bathers with some trifling development here on distant Earth?" demanded President Arno Hopmeier of the World Antisubjectivist Council. "The Blood Bathers are busily researching novel realms of complex organization far beyond mere 'intelligence.' We should feel extremely honored that they still bother to share their lab results with creatures like us. It would only annoy Their Skinless Eminences if we ask them to fret over some defunct race of featherless bipeds."

A Circumsolar Day of Mourning has been declared to commemorate the official extinction of humanity, but it is widely believed that bursts of wild public enthusiasm will mar the funereal proceedings.

"When you sum them up," mused Orbital Entity Ankh/Ghih/9819, "it's hard to perceive any tragedy in this long-awaited event. Beasts, birds, butterflies, even the very rocks and rivers must be rejoicing to see humans finally gone. We should try to be adult about this: we should take a deep breath, turn our face to the light of the future, and get on with the business of living.

"Since I've been asked to offer an epitaph," the highly distributed poetware continued, "I believe that we should rearrange the Great Wall of China to spell out—(in Chinese of course, since most of them were always Chinese)—'THEY WERE VERY, VERY CURIOUS, BUT NOT AT ALL FARSIGHTED.'

"This historical moment is a serious occasion that requires a sense of public dignity. My dog, for instance, says he'll truly miss humanity. But then again, my dog says a lot of things." O

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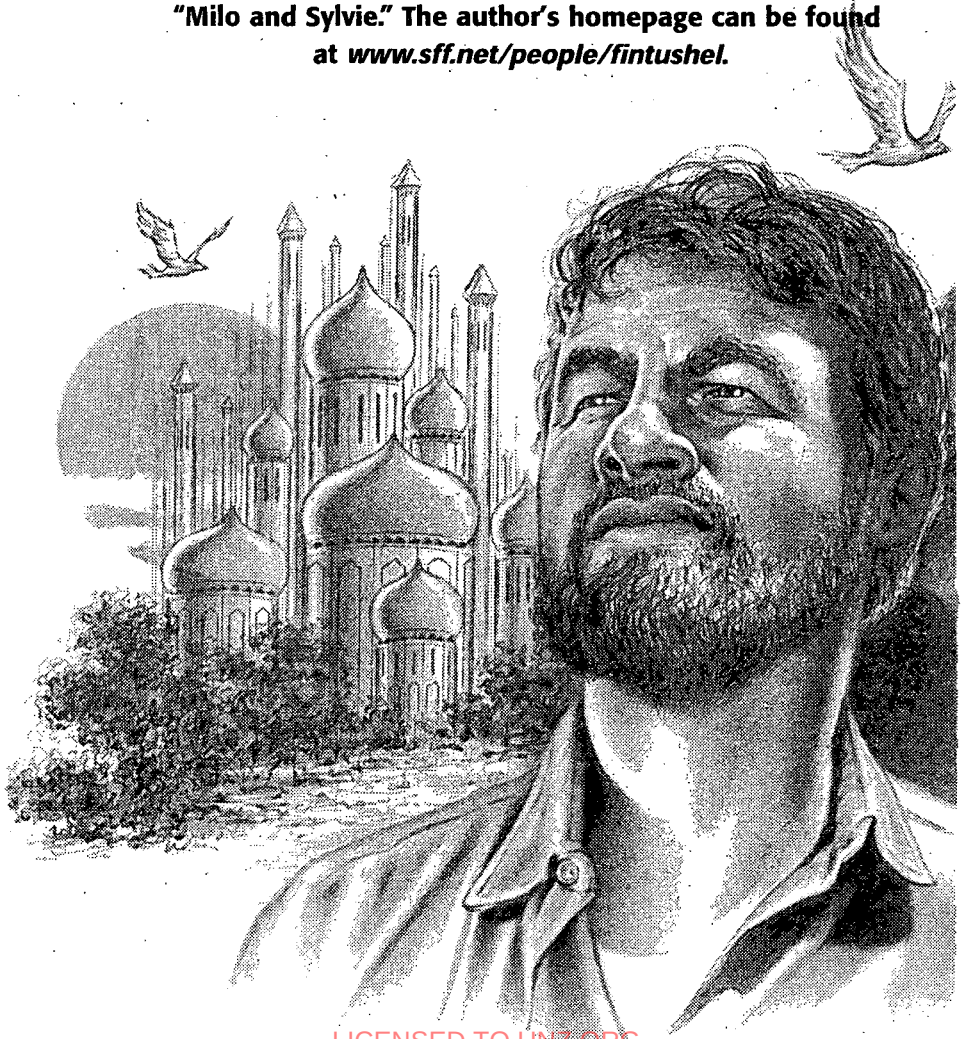
Eliot Fintushel is a traveling performer of mask and mime shows. He has won the National Endowment's award for Solo Theater Artists twice, and made millions and millions of children laugh. A story of Mr. Fintushel's was a 1999 Nebula finalist. His short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *The Ohio Review*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Amazing Stories*, *The Whole Earth Review*, and various anthologies in and out of genre. Current projects include *The Book of Izzy*, a collection of stories about the mischievous one-browed psychic, and a novel, *Dede and Milo*, based on the characters in his *Asimov's* story "Milo and Sylvie." The author's homepage can be found at *www.sff.net/people/fintushel*.



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Female Action

Eliot Fintushel

Illustration by John Stevens

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Down from the Nepalese highlands the tantric holyman came riding, riding, divine cocksman chased from the mountain fastnesses of Tibet by the Chinese and their dull goatherd collaborationists. In drag Tongyu Kargup rode, rode, preserving what holy lingam statuary he could secrete in saddlebags and under robes, rode right to Sarvaduhka's door. He spoke in a strange mixture of Hindi and English peppered with Sanskrit and Tibetan words.

"Mrs. Sarvaduhka, you have a son Jai whom I know to be a *tulku,* the incarnation of a great master of our sect. Your Jai is destined to drive out the Chinese devils and rebuild the Temple of Endless and Divine Copulation through ecstatic union with multitudes of *pretas, asuras,* animals, humans, *devas,* and *bodhisattvas,* including also *pratyekabuddhas* and many lesser beings, both male and female, with his lingam to reach the tip of which from a point a handspan below your son's navel would take a heavenly being twenty *asamkhyas* of *kalpas*—a very long time. . . ."

Mrs. S. shut the door in the man's face, locked seven-year-old Jai in his dead father's room, and called the police.

Now, at the age of thirty-five, a week of leap years later (twenty-eight circlings of the sun, three hundred seventy-three windings of the moon, ten thousand two hundred evenings—give or take) Jai Sarvaduhka sat at Fay's enameled metal kitchen table in a bentwood chair painted brown. He was a sleek dark man with a perfectly oval face, a small carefully trimmed mustache, and a mop of thick jet black hair. Probably, Sarvaduhka reasoned, if Tongyu Kargup survived jail, he made the same little speech at a dozen other doors, but Sarvaduhka had always wondered: was it just as the holyman had said and he suffered because he had dodged his true fate? He stared at the linoleum and shook his head.

"I will buy a car and I will run a tube from the exhaust into the back seat where I will recline with eyes closed until I am falling asleep forever." He covered his face with his hands.

Fay stood at the table chopping carrots for a stew. She worked the big knife like a pro, pressing the point against the chopping board and levering the blade up and down as she pushed the carrot under it, chop, chop, chop! Now and then she paused to wipe a strand of hair out of her eyes with the back of her wrist. She was a gently chubby woman, dark-haired once, now prettily greying, the flesh ever so slightly unsnugging from her small bones. Her face was small too, with little pen-and-ink wrinkles, crow's feet and dimple tracks. "What do you need to buy a new car for? Why don't you use your squareback?"

"Too many rust holes, and the rear passenger-side window doesn't close all the way. It would take too long to seal it properly."

"Izzy's got a roll of duct tape on the ledge by the cellar steps. You could use all you want as long as you put it back. I mean, heck, it doesn't have to be a work of art if you're not going to drive the thing again, right?"

Sarvaduhka lifted his face from between his hands and his elbows from his knees. He stood up. "You are living too long with that Izzy. You never used to talk in this manner. You used to be kind, attentive, compassionate, womanly." He began to cry. "Now you are like all women. What do you care about my heart and my needs? Go, make jokes like Izzy. When I am a heap of bones in the back of a brand new Mercedes-Benz . . ."

"A Mercedes? Are you sure?"

"Yes. Excellent, excellent car. My rich cousin never buys anything else.

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When I am lying there in a heap, then your tears will flow, Fay, but it will be too late!"

"What color are you thinking?"

"White."

"Nice choice. Will you hand me over the colander with the string beans?"

Sarvaduhka reached for the colander behind him where it sat draining in the sink. He laid it down by the cutting board with great delicacy. He was capable of that. He could be very refined when he wanted to be.

As a child, his mother had made him take lessons from a Kathak dance master in Bombay. The little girls at the school were enchanting. For them, for their lithe little bodies and their unblinking dark eyes, Sarvaduhka, at the age of eight, excelled. He could tap his feet like little daggers and undulate his hands like windswept water. But he could not speak to them. His tongue would turn to ash and his mind to ghee. He waited for them to approach him, and they did—at seven or eight or nine they were unabashed enough if no grown-ups were around—but their advances paralyzed him. The little girls in their bangles with their bare midriffs and their gold slippers giggled or pouted or wrinkled their noses at him—and vanished.

Then there were the superior snubbing looks they gave him forever after as they danced, whenever they caught him staring at them. They were looks that said, "You drew us to you with your eyes and then you wimped out! You are not worthy even to play tag with us." Finally young Sarvaduhka couldn't stand it anymore. Toward the end of the second year, pleading mysterious ankle pain, he prevailed upon his mother to put an end to it.

After that he made a religion of the movies, where you never had to talk to the girls and they loved you anyway. They loved you. It was in their eyes, hugely. They loved you. They sang to you. They danced for you. For *you.*

"For women it is easy," Sarvaduhka soliloquized. He trudged to the old phone booth in the corner of the kitchen, the one Izzy was supposed to be making into an orgone box. He caught hold of the folding door and let his fingers butter down as he slid onto the round black seat. Like a saddle it was, contoured to the buttocks, and he the Dying Cowboy. "Women have everything a person is wanting—breasts, long hair, soft large eyes, smooth skin, private parts, everything! Even the ugly ones have it!"

The phone rang before Fay could hurl the colander at him. Sarvaduhka looked question marks at the phone. It worked? Maybe orgones would come out. Maybe orgones were aphrodisiac. He picked it up, and before he could say a word a low nicotine-shattered voice croaked, "Speaking."

He could almost see Izzy's furry brow rise, thicker than Frida Kahlo's, joined like Frida's above the nose but with stiff little grey hairs sticking out like slugs' antennae. He could see the lips curl up on one side in Izzy's trademark mixture of irony and charm.

That fellow was bad luck! And when he read your mind or fooled you into helping out in some minor skirmish of his great galactic wars—a ride to the beach, perhaps, or a Danish delivery at three AM, or the loan of a sawbuck—it was like being bitten by a malarial mosquito; he got something: your blood, and you got something: the shits.

"Hello? Fay?" crooned Izzy. "Is that you, darling, sweetie-pie, light of my life, skin of my pudding?"

"No, you know it isn't."

"Duke of Earl, as I live and breathe! What are you doing in my orgone box?"

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"Somewhere a white Mercedes awaits me, with a chrome exhaust extension, one-and-one-half inch outer diameter. Hose that size is easy to find." He began to blubber.

"Don't give me that, Duke. What, are you off your lithium again? You ain't gonna kill yourself. You never do. You never even see the inside of a white Mercedes. You couldn't afford it, for one thing. You die of an aneurysm at age eighty-five and two months when you're startled by a very large but harmless spider that has wandered onto your cot at the old home in Duluth."

Psychic *pup'hula!* Farts! "Why do you tell me always the bad things and never the good? When am I having some female action, Izzy?" He shook his head like a tolling bell. "The person is sad." Saying this filled him with a vague feeling of nostalgia.

"Huh?"

"Someone told me so once—I do not remember who."

"It ain't good English, Dicky. Must be a translation, Rilke maybe. 'The person,' huh? Maybe 'der Mench' or 'Dasein' or one of them other big d's. I channel Rilke sometimes."

"The person is sad, Izzy," Sarvaduhka sobbed.

"Put Fay on, willya?"

Sarvaduhka held out the phone for Fay, but he stayed put in the booth. She stopped brandishing the colander and took the phone from him. "'The person is sad!'" she mimicked.

"Yeah?" she said into the phone. "Oh, stop it!"—blushing—"Stop it, really. . . ! Well, I love you too, you ugly oaf. . . . He's been driving me crazy all morning. I'm being tough, like you said, Iz. . . . The what. . . ? The Inter-*who*. . . ? Well, I think it's a terrible idea, actually, but okay, I'll keep him here. Wait, Iz—why did you call. . . ? You sweet jerk, me too!"

Fay hung up. "Don't buy any cars yet. Izzy's coming right over. He's going to help you write a Personals ad."

"I have *tried* Personals ads."

"You haven't tried this one, dear."

"Fay baby, I love you so much I think I'm gonna have to start taking you to Szbarsky's with me and park you by the degreasing vat for your occasional hug-and-a-kiss."

Izzy smooched the air loudly and hung up the phone. He checked the coin well for change. Not that he was owed any—just a reflex. Around the corridor—yellowed walls striped at the bottoms by the hubs of heavy carts and darkened at the tops by burnt grease fumes—the machines never stopped pounding. Izzy's earthly bailiwick: tool and die. The afternoon break was over, but he had a few minutes' grace time before Szbarsky hit the floor and noticed the missing body at Izzy's station: Szbarsky, wife and kids despite, was working on a barmaid down the street; his remaining hairs got blacker and neater, and his time off the floor got longer and longer.

Aside from that boa of a brow, there wasn't much hair on Izzy's head either. A salt and pepper crescent framed his scalp like sprigs of laurel on a Roman senator. His face had absorbed something of Fay after all these years, an asymmetry where one corner of the lip liked to rise while the opposing eyebrow furrowed: bittersweet.

He took the back stairs up to the rooftop and gazed northwest. Grey scud was all a person could see, unless they were Izzy. He barely noticed the lake effect sky of solder and sludge or the ozone wind of a coming storm, another

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coming storm. He watched the comet approach. He saw it right through the day sky and through the black interplanetary deeps and through the sun itself. He heard clicks and chatter from alien vessels that circled the comet, logging its path, computing its trajectory.

In about a year two fellows name of Hale and Bopp would spy it—in one scenario; there would be a lovely celestial light show for a few months, and then the whole planet would vaporize. Zero ground for the comet's impact would be central Asia, but by T plus 10 or so, one place would be pretty much the same as another. There were other scenarios, other time lines slightly or greatly different, other dimensional nexuses through which events might funnel, but this looked to be the current path.

Aboard one of the alien ships a reporter for the *Interdimensional Pennysaver and Gazette,* a hominid mostly, petite and male, mostly, chitchatted with the skipper. The skipper was a hulking hermaphrodite who looked like a mountain of congealed oatmeal topped with grenadine that funneled down in pulsing curlicues. Izzy got that this wasn't really *news* for readers of the *Inter-Dee;* this sort of thing—vaporizations of planetary cultures—happened all the time. It was a "human"-interest story the reporter was working on, a sidebar for a feature on cosmic collisions generally, on the civilizations they destroy, and on the dedicated beings like Skipper B'shucks who track them throughout the dimensions and galaxies for the sake of Science.

B'shucks was not a good interview, unfortunately. "Hell, I don't know," B'shucks liked to say. Or, "Maybe and maybe not." And sometimes, "I just do what they tell me." The sockdolager, though, the remark that made the *Inter-Dee* guy tuck his pencil back behind a couple of his ears and repair to the promenade deck, was this: "Look, the whole collision here—this is what the guys upstairs tell me—might not even happen. I mean, it could or it couldn't, depending."

"On. . . ?" queried the *Inter-Dee.*

The oatmeal man shrugged, sort of.

"Izzy Molson, you lazy son of a bitch," came a voice from the hallway below: Szbarsky—no mistaking that winsome cadence. "I got your ass this time. I'm docking you for this here, honest to God I am."

Izzy and Sarvaduhka sat at the kitchen table with a spiral pad, a number two pencil, and something that looked like a newspaper as long as you didn't tilt your head at it or touch it. It was like a button with a campaign slogan visible at one angle and, at another, the candidate's grinning mug. Look at that paper the wrong way, brother, and it was stardust and vertigo.

As usual Iz was all monkeyshines. He'd smile and Sarvaduhka would check his wallet pocket. Unfair: it wasn't dollars Izzy teased from him, just his thoughts. Most of the time.

"What sort of newspaper is this?"

"It's a very big one, one of the biggest, readers in more dimensions than you can shake a stick at, and the Personals are syndicated to a gazillion local papers. The *Inter-Dimensional Pennysaver and Gazette* is what it's called, Duhka, and if it's a mate you want, female or any other kind, this is definitely your way to go! So, as if I didn't know, tell me about yourself and what you're looking for in a woman, you sleazy SOB."

What am I looking for in a woman? Sarvaduhka paused and swallowed hard. There was a slight tic in his right eye as he stared across the table at Izzy. His lips tightened. He took a deep breath.

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"I don't care if she is a virgin or not."

There! He had said it. Let the souls of his ancestors cringe. With the move to North America and his cousins' hospitality business empire, many old customs had had to be jettisoned.

He missed some of them, it was true. Suttee, for example. Uncle Ari, eyes aglow, had described to him the incredible devotion of women of generations past; even after it had been outlawed by the Raj, wives immolated themselves in their husbands' funeral pyres, sometimes with their daughters. Uncle Ari had seen a few of these rituals as a child, the smells of burning flesh mingling with incense. "It was inspiring, I tell you! Where can one find such women nowadays, I am asking you, with everywhere women's liberation and the curse of coeducationalism?" Uncle Ari spat three times loudly, as he often liked to do, against the curse of coeducationalism. "Gone, gone, completely gone, absolutely completely gone," he sang, paraphrasing the sutra, "is all hope of genuine *female action*."

Uncle Ari had never correctly understood this phrase "female action." He had heard the phrase used in a British club where he had caddied as a boy, when two sweaty extravagantly mustached golfers in safari suits had bandied it about in what little Ari had taken to be a discussion of religion; he had had to run into a grove of trees to retrieve a ball in the middle of the conversation, and therefore had never had his understanding clarified. To Uncle Ari "female action" meant something profound, as deep as the split between the sexes itself, an epitome of the primeval lineaments of femininity in all its richness.

Sarvaduhka inherited this understanding of the phrase "female action" from his old uncle. Somehow, under the vast attack of American popular culture pecking at every salty pore from the moment of his exopthalmic tachycardiac first arrival at LaGuardia International, Sarvaduhka's aberrant inherited understanding of "female action" had never been compromised. It occupied so central a place in his personal metaphysics that he would rather sacrifice happiness and logic than that.

"Listen, will you stop excogitating on Uncle Ari and tell me what do you want in a female if not virginity?"

"Someone who will love me without condition! Someone who will sign guests in and keep the folios in order when I am indisposed. A helpmeet to serve me! She will enumerate my virtues like a man praying to God. She will bear me children. She will cook whatever I like. She will coo to me and stroke me as a mother coos and strokes her baby. She will agree with me in all things and never voice an opinion at variance with my own. She will be free of excess fat, but not self-consciously slender. Slight corpulence is quite becoming to a woman, I believe, quite sane. She will have a sweet, bird-like voice and spend her days and her nights seeking to please me ever more completely. In bed, a wild animal—though generally docile! And she will know the value of a clean house!"

Sarvaduhka leaned across the table toward Izzy. "You know what I mean—*female action!*"

"Ah!" Izzy wrote something down in the spiral pad and it began to effervesce. Sarvaduhka's eyes widened and he shrank back like a turtle into its shell.

"We don't have long," Izzy said. "These transdimensional jobs are very unstable, *kapeesh?* Now, how would you like to describe yourself?"

He didn't have to think about that one. "Buff stud with attractive mus-

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taches and thick hair, not just on head but all over my tight little body." For just a second, reflecting on it, Sarvaduhka smiled. A patch of blue. Then the clouds scabbed over.

"In search of. . . ?"

"*Female action.*'"

"Bingo! I'm happy to report three responses that seem to fit your criteria—*no, that's later!*" The paper was fizzing again, giving off an odor like plaster dust, turtle bowl sludge, and ether. "Damn thing about the *Inter-Dee* is that it curls through our dimension like chokeweed through a chain link fence. Past and future go a little haywire. I better shut up about Inana and the rest."

"Tell me anyway!" Sarvaduhka reached across the table and clutched Izzy's forearm. "Inana? Who is Inana? Is she a virgin? Is she beautiful?"

"Look, I'll post your ad for you. Mind you, the responses can come in any form, to you directly or in care of Fay or the Shah of Tahini for that matter. Chokeweed. Wait—you've already gotten one, I mean, in the actual past. This one's a man."

"A what?"

"Two actually—but there we go again. Chokeweed. I better shut up. I feel like a skydiver doing a corkscrew."

"Tell me."

"Let go my arm and I'll tell you one." Sarvaduhka let go. "It was a guy name of Tongyu Kargup, a Tibetan."

"Yes, I saw him years ago when I was a boy. He came to my mother's house. It was the ad that brought him? He said he had come because I was some kind of savior."

"He was being romantic, I guess."

The tabletop turned to dark jelly. A whirlpool formed, carrying the *Inter-Dee* down. Sarvaduhka felt warm air whoosh in after it past his ears. His hair whipped down in front of his eyes. Izzy clutched his eyeglasses. Then Sarvaduhka felt a wave of heat as on the opening of a kiln door. The hole in the gelid tabletop closed up and the tabletop itself was sucked into the air like shower steam on a dry day. The four table legs, with nothing between them anymore, dropped to the floor, clap, clap, clap, clap. Sarvaduhka realized that his mouth was hanging open, and he closed it.

"Who's Tongyu Kargup?" Fay sidled in past Izzy's orgone box. She spotted the empty space between the two men and did a neat double take. "Hey, that was my mother's table."

"It'll be back good as new, Fay." Izzy collected the legs and piled them out of the way in a corner of his orgone box.

"My heart won't," said Sarvaduhka. "My first respondent was a madman from Tibet—and that was thirty years ago! Future and past are a big *pup'hula,* it seems." Sarvaduhka's chin dropped to his chest as if his neck had broken.

Fay shot Izzy a black look, then tousled Sarvaduhka's hair. "You poor baby, I'm sorry I've been giving you a hard time. Somebody ought to just hug you."

"Inana," moaned Sarvaduhka. He looked pleadingly up at Izzy.

"Mum's the word," said Izzy, "but buck up, old scarf. She's got your number."

Here's what Fay and Izzy talked about over dinner that night: Sarvaduhka. Sarvaduhka—and Time.

"It's not Route 80 through the salt flats," said Izzy.

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"What's not?"

"Time. It's not a straight run like people think."

Absent a kitchen table, Iz had declared a picnic. He made taco salad and spread a tablecloth on the living room floor. He tied button thread to the light fixture, from which he suspended a chopstick by the middle; another piece of thread went on each end of the chopstick, and at the ends of these he dangled little horseflies he had fashioned from scraps of carbon paper, aluminum foil, and your odd bristle from a half depilated scrub brush. Fay contributed a few warm beers from the basement stash. They sat knee to knee and nibbled.

"You can see it all, though, huh, Iz? All time?"

"Yeah, pretty much." He swatted a fly from his head. "I see it pretty good, but it's like a knot—you try to follow a single thread through all that tangle so you can untie the thing. Good luck! But sometimes you hit the jackpot: you jimmy it here and tug it there, pry a bit loose with a rigging knife, say, and—hey presto!—Sarvaduhka's got a girlfriend, know what I mean?"

"Sure. Knots. Pass me another beer, willya? Gee, the flies aren't so bad for this time of year."

"It's the breeze."

He handed her the beer. She took his hand instead of the bottle directly, and she held onto it for a moment. "I'm worried about Sarvaduhka, Izzy."

"You know what his name means, don't you, in Sanskrit?"

"I used to."

"*All sorrows,* Fay honey. Tough row to hoe however you cut it."

Fay sighed. She took the beer, opened it, and caught the foam in her HERS mug. Thick brown liquid chortled after.

"I'm like a switchman, see?" Izzy went on. "There's a kajillion junctions and switches, give or take, and every combination gives you a different history. Some go round in circles even, but don't get me started on that."

"I love your noggin, Izzy, but I'm awful glad I'm not in it."

"You just said a mouthful. Anyways, one set of tracks and switches takes you to Cleveland. Another one lands you in Toledo. Fair enough. But there's so many switch points, Fay, and they're in such funny spots, it gives a guy an Excedrin headache just to think about 'em. Take your Sarvaduhka here."

Izzy took a hit of his Murphy's Stout straight from the wide brown bottle, but his eyes stayed on Fay as his head dipped back, like a baby doll with weighted eyeballs.

What's he sizing me up for? she thought.

"Yeah,"—wiping the foam from his mouth and chin— "maybe if he had some actual nooky, a comet would crash into Lake Ontario, see, just hypothetical now,"—thinking, *into Central Asia, really*— "because that switch that tracked him onto the nooky also set the comet's path that way. Things are tied up like that, honest to God, Fay. Maybe things depend on old Duke in ways he ain't privy to, if you catch my drift."

"That's a lot of responsibility for one switchman, Izzy."

"Oh, I ain't the only one. But in Sarvaduhka's case I am, let's say, the proximate one."

Fay sat up quite straight, which means that her spine, although she was not aware of this, lay along a radius from the center of the earth on out to infinity, and with the slight increase of her height as she unhunched, the earth's spin imperceptibly but actually slowed. Somewhere a villain laid his evil plans aside. Somewhere a mood that had been lightening darkened

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again. A knife slipped from a butcher's hand. A computer screen flashed too brightly.

Everything has its effect.

"Izzy Molson, have you been psychicking around with Sarvaduhka's fate?"

He shoveled a heap of lettuce into his mouth. "Too much cilantro for you, Fay honey?"

"Anyway, I want my table back."

Inana!

Late at night in his office at the Lucky Three, with Agarbatti jasmine incense burning in the little copper bowl with elephant's feet and with Hindi love songs undulating out of the Sears Panasonic by the rolodex, Sarvaduhka sucked on his ballpoint, stared with arched brows at the ceiling fan, and composed.

Inana! I love you. I am collecting tokens of you—the curve of your cheek, the sea-blue eyes, your lashes, your small, soft lips, your teeth even—I am a fool for it!—I make my home in your face, in the little wrinkles and in the smooth mounds, your nose I am wanting to nuzzle and kiss. I see you sitting, knees drawn up before you, arms wrapped around them, and I am wanting to unwrap your arms and open your legs and wrap your arms around me and close your legs around me and see your eyes close and flutter and see you helplessly smile, delighted. I am wanting to kiss you in the center of the star of you where legs and belly meet and where your arms meet your torso, in the hollows, on the small of your back, on your breasts, one, two, and again, one, two, and again, one, two, and again, until you are having to stop me and draw my lips to your lips and the center of my star to yours. We sit, we lie, we tumble. We tumble far. We tumble very far. We tumble very, very far into the well of you, into the swell of me, each into other to swim and drink. Sweat comes. Tears come. Sighs come. Thoughts come. Hearts beat. I am feeling your heart pound against my ribs. You stare up at me, and I am terrified, because you are no thing any civilized human being has ever named or taught me about. You smile or you cock your head at me, and I am seeing something I have never seen before, an animal for my animal, something so simple and nameless and excruciatingly dear that all of civilization, Ur and Chaldea and Jerusalem and Delhi and Babylon and Rome and Washington, has trembled and shook and urged itself upward to touch it and possess it—but it never could, and it won't, it can't, because it is too near to our heart to name. I am terrified because I didn't think I would ever encounter you like this, my heart, outside me, so fragile, mortal, an animal like me, raw, made of flesh—whose every tic and flutter moves me so deeply it is like dying and dying, like burning up or becoming steam, or as if I were inside my blood and washing, over and over, electric and startled, into lungs, into dark red chambers of heart, pulse by pulse, terrified, ecstatic, happy beyond my body and mind. I can't think it. I can't contain it. I only can move in it. How did you get inside me, you, sea-blue-eyed, bittersweetly smiling, probing and provoking me, exploding through my blood, touching my thoughts everywhere and making them explode everywhere into tokens of you? I love you.

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He read and reread his love letter. The sitar tongued him like a lover. He trembled with pleasure at the thought of Inana touching the paper just where his hands touched it, kissing it, and then kissing *him.* He could hardly wait to meet her and to fall in love with her, so that all this could happen.

Lingering over one of his many delicately positioned commas, Sarvaduhka's eye caught an unfamiliar sheet of thick handmade paper spindled into one of the cubbies of his rolltop desk. He gave it a squint and pulled it out.

Pink. Perfumed. He unrolled it and read:

Dear Duke,

You are a nice man, and I very much enjoyed the lunch at Woolworth's and the dancing at the Western Bar, which we don't have any of them in my world, and I will always fondly remember the tour of the Lucky Three. Your remarks about the hospitality business in the context of current legal trends in your dimension was positively edifying, but I need to stop seeing you now, as my psychic flow is pouring in another direction. I'm glad I answered your ad, and I wish you the best of luck with other respondents. You are a nice man, and I know that you will find your special someone before the comet hits and the earth goes missing.

Sincerely,
Jnhglx

"Earth goes missing?" Sarvaduhka shivered. *Pup'hula!* Of all the Dear John lines a woman could think up. . . !

None of this had ever happened, mind you, but he remembered now that she hadn't even been a woman by any sane thisworldly standards! The paper was back in the cubby. He pulled it out again, crumpled it, and thrust it into the wastebasket. It was back in the cubby. Oh, she looked feminine enough to the casual observer, he seemed to know, but when you got a little bit intimate you saw that she was just wearing that body in three dimensions; in the fourth, she was blurs and brain fizz, sky flowers and phantom limbs.

He tore the note into small pieces, stuffed them into the incense bowl, and set them on fire with a stick match from another cubby. "I read your ad in the *Inter-Dee,"* he heard her saying, "and you sound like exactly my type. Gee, I love guys from your dimension! Did you say you have hair *all* over your tight little body?" It was back in the cubby. Thank God she had been a cheap date. Next time he would say "no" right off the bat to anybody from another dimension. He would wait for Inana.

Oh please God, let Inana be a thisworlder!

He looked at the cubby. This time Jnhglx's letter wasn't there yet. Sarvaduhka was beginning to feel like a movie with a misaligned soundtrack; ever since that ad had gone in, cause and effect played leapfrog.

He thought he heard the bell tinkle at the front office door, but when he rose and pushed through the bead curtains to see who was there, the office was empty. His chest felt heavy. The fluorescent ceiling light was unkind to the front office. It cast shadows that magnified the lumps in the wallpaper and the nicks and cracks in the furniture. Everything was dull and needed a new coat of paint, varnish, wax, something. He felt lonely.

He picked up the phone at the front desk, aimed a forefinger at the buttons, then paused. No, he would not call any of his cousins this time. Maybe there had been a time when he needed the companionship so badly that he

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would put up with their derision—not now. They all had families and fancy cars. What did Sarvaduhka have? An ancient VW squareback with a rope for the clutch and a Playboy bunny deodorizer that depressed him because it did nothing but deodorize.

Most of the cousins had wives *and* girlfriends. "When in Rome!" they laughed, slapping him on the back. He winced to think of it. "Are you a monk, *yaar?* Are you already a *Sanyasin*, a holy homeless wanderer—and running the Lucky Three!" More horse laughter. More back slaps. They didn't realize that the person was sad. "Don't take offense, cousin! We are only making a joke, *na?*"

Of course they could succeed. They could build up their franchises and accumulate cars and mistresses precisely because they did not *need* the way Sarvaduhka needed! He couldn't even think straight in the absence of female action. Every thought had a hole in it in the place where the feminine was required. His finger still hovered over the number pad. Every thought, to signify, needs its feminine. Sarvaduhka felt like a scooped-out melon invisibly stitched together but rotting inside, rotting and slowly collapsing. He could barely bring himself to get out of bed mornings. He woke up thinking, *Female action. . . !* He went to bed nights thinking, *Still no female action!*

At last he stabbed the numbers for Izzy and Fay's.

From its green rusted bowl, the incense smoked at Sarvaduhka, a tiny winking red eye. Around it, charring and crumbling, the edges of the Dear John smoldered—it was there now. Sarvaduhka thought, *Suttee.*

Izzy answered. "Miss Lonelyhearts here. They nix ya, we fix ya."

"Izzy, have you heard from Inana for me?"

"Well, matter of fact, a telegram just came in through Fay's fillings. . . ."

"Telegram? Fillings? What does it say?"

"How do I know? It's in Morse code or something. A toothache in Morse code! I just write down the dots and dashes."

"It could be for myself, yes? It could be Inana communicating with you concerning my ad in the *Inter-Dee,* yes?

"Hold your horses, Czar. I'm gonna give you Fay while I work out them dats 'n' doshes."

Fay came on. "Jai?"

"Oh Fay, Fay, that *mahapup'hula,* Izzy, that big fart, he's just giving me a hard time, isn't he, with his dots and dashes?"

"You poor bunny, you don't know the half of it."

She sounded wounded. The person is sad. Her voice was so sad and sweet, it made him teary, like a lost child at the sound of its mama's call. "I love my Inana, Fay! Oh, she is my sweet mango! I think only of her. I'm going to ask her to marry me. Am I crazy, do you think?"

"Oh, Sarvaduhka, how did you get to be thirty-five and still think like you do? You have to at least wait until you've met her! And don't you know, if you come on too strong, hungry as you are, you'll send her flying before you can get two words in."

"This sounds right. This is good information. Slow down. Meet her first. Get two words in. Already you have helped me, Fay."

"Wait a minute. Old One-brow is handing me a piece of paper here. It's the translation of my toothache—oh Lord!"

"What? What?" Sarvaduhka stopped his tape player in the middle of a *tabla* solo.

"It's from Inana."

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"From Inana! Is she a thisworlder? Is she beautiful? Is she a virgin?"

"'Meet me at the same place next Sunday at dusk.' That's all it says, Duck."

"Where is this 'same place'? We have never met before!"

"Must be the time thing again, befores and afters all mixed up. Damn that switchman!"

"Huh?"

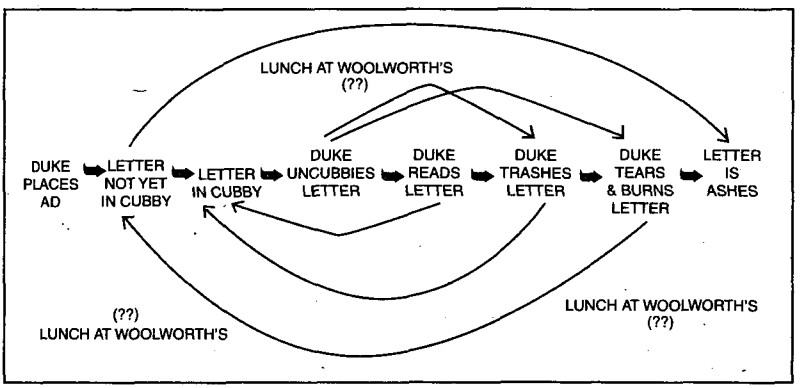
"Look, just take it slow! I'll call you later to see how things went, okay? Bye-bye, sweetie!"

She hung up.

The incense was out. Jnhglx's letter was black silt. Sarvaduhka shook his head. He was feeling tired, starting to hear sitar music even without the Panasonic, but he wouldn't be able to fall asleep until he settled one small matter.

He pulled out a piece of Lucky Three stationery and began to pencil the sequence of events regarding Jnhglx. He went through both sides of four or five sheets and broke two pencil points before he came up with a nearly workable system of representation. In it time took the appearance of cold fronts on a weather map. Things swirled and returned, but Sarvaduhka forced out a linear sequence in the middle of it all; yes, he squeezed to the peripheries all the *pup'hula,* all the eccentric violations of the unidimensionality of time. Hell, even Kant and Hume had agreed on that—time was definitely single file—and he was sure the Vedanta Sutras said the same, or if not, then let them rot.

Even in the main sequence, he couldn't quite get rid of things that happened before their causes, and the lunch at Woolworth's that was the impetus for so much of it seemed to hover outside the whole shooting match, but except for that, everything was single file, anyway. It would have to do.



Sarvaduhka yawned and stretched, and as he did so he imagined little Cupid's arrows flying from his heart in all directions, like the arrows on his weather map. Surely one of them would strike dear Inana. His love letter to her lay unsigned on the rolltop. He signed it and turned out the desk lamp. Dark. He made a Kathak wavelet of his hand and rolled it into the Sears Panasonic. *Click!* The *tabla* picked up and a sweet soprano voice flavored the dark. What was "the same place"? He had three days to figure it out—if time meant any damn thing.

* * *

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The inspiration came like a thunderbolt (Tibetan: *dorje*) on waking with the customary erection the morning after the message from Inana. Call Darjeeling, came the thought. (*Dorje-lingam:* Thunderbolt dick.) Call the Tibetan Refugee Center in Darjeeling. Find Tongyu Kargup.

To Sarvaduhka it seemed an inescapable conclusion. Why else would Tongyu Kargup have knocked at his mother's door? Why else would the holyman's name have exactly *one* more syllable than "Inana," and why else would the one letter in "Inana" that did not appear in "Tongyu Kargup" be "I," that is, Sarvaduhka himself, the *one* in need of another?

The logic was transparent: Tongyu Kargup would lead him to Inana.

Sarvaduhka scrambled out of bed and began making phone calls while the fishes still swam behind his eyelids. International information took three tries. The long distance connection to Darjeeling took two more; however—and this was surely another sign—someone there actually knew of the eccentric old yogin. Tongyu Kargup had continued riding, riding, apparently, past Sarvy's mother's door, in and out of ashrams and prisons all over northern India, making quite a name for himself and even gathering a few disciples. The holyman, Sarvaduhka's informant told him, was said to be holding court in a certain *dharmashala*, a pilgrims' shelter, in the city of Khajuraho.

Sarvaduhka clapped his hands. In Khajuraho, he knew well, there were twenty-some famous temples, remnants of the Chandella dynasty, filled with sculpture depicting the ecstatic delights, yes, of *female action,* or as close as made no difference. Yet another confirmation! He stared down in grateful wonderment at the prophetic *dorje* that had lifted his counterpane.

He headed for India.

"You're nuts, Sarvaduhka," was Fay's take on it as she let him out of her car at the airport. He hadn't even packed an overnight bag. "Who put this cockamamie idea in your head? Why don't you at least ask Izzy?"

"Tongyu Kargup will lead me to Inana." He charged into the terminal without looking back, but he thought he heard Fay say, enigmatically, as she slammed the door shut,

"The persimmon is bad." Something like that.

Sarvaduhka fixed his mind on Inana.

Sometimes life offers up her keyhole, Sarvaduhka thought as he stared out at the tarmac during the stopover in London. He wouldn't get off the plane. He didn't want to break his concentration. *Everything falls together. The pattern of one's existence is revealed!* The baggage jockeys trucked things in and out of the 707's yoni. Up in First Class, a man in white overalls with a belt full of tools made a racket in the comfort station. *Like the rows of plants in a cotton field: whoever looks, from whatever angle, all the rows converge on* his *eye.* Sarvaduhka laughed. *Inana! You are my keyhole! My whole life has been the hallway and the door and the cornfield. Everything led me to this.*

"I beg your pardon, sir?" A flight attendant in a sari leaned over Sarvaduhka, her arms upraised. She clicked shut the overhead baggage compartment and cocked her head at him.

When had everyone re-boarded? Must be the time thing again.

"Nothing! Nothing! It is a lovely day, isn't it?"

Miles high, arrowing through cumuli, he saw only Inana. *Try to remember the first meeting. Try to remember the smell of her perfume.* Nothing. But maybe in this screwy inter-dimensional Personals world their first meeting would come later, months or years after the second!

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He had started out with a three day lead till Sunday dusk. Getting to Delhi was taking better than twenty-four hours. In addition, he was losing half a day to the time change. Then there were the uncertainties of transport to Khajuraho. Tongyu Kargup might not be at the dharmashala, and then Sarvaduhka would have to search for him . . .

But what if it were a wild goose chase?

Then let me be a wild goose! Honk! Honk!

Iz came home early from Szbarsky's Tool and Die. He headed straight for the bathroom doorway and slung the traction gear up onto the eyehook in the lintel. Tried to, that is—he couldn't unbend himself sufficiently to reach. His lower back was in spasm again.

"Let me help you, Izzy." Fay was just coming in from a grocery trip, laying down bags on the card table that temporarily replaced her mother's heirloom.

"Naw, forget it." He lay down on his back on the floor outside the bathroom with his butt a few feet from the mopboard, and he stretched his legs up so his heels pressed against the wall. Were his legs straight? Impossible. They were crooked as a dead dog's tail. "Lean on these gams though, wouldja sweetie-pie?"

She pressed his knees down; he groaned, then sighed.

"Iz, how come when I push on your knees it makes your back feel better?"

"Everything's connected, Fay baby." He scootched up a few inches closer to the wall, and Fay pressed down gently, gently once again.

"Is that how come a guy like you, Emperor of the Magellanic Clouds and all, a guy that can hear the dandruff falling on the scalp of the Man in the Moon . . ."

"Did I tell you that?"

". . . uh huh . . . a guy that can shoulder that lever, that switch bar between all the pasts and futures,"—kissing loudly the hollows of his knees, one, two—"has to punch in every morning at Szbarsky's?"

"Yes, Fay." He lifted his head, but it cost him—he grimaced and lowered it again. "Yes, that's why. You don't want to know what would happen if I took early retirement."

"I guess not." His shins were just a little furry. Fay stroked to the rhythm of her thinking, dark water warmly lapping. "Y'know, I took the Czar to the airport today. He's got it into his head to track down that Tibetan guy so the Tibetan guy can put him together with Sha-na-na. Where does he come up with these ideas. . . ?" Her hands lay still at Izzy's ankles. "Hey Iz, how come you told him about the Tibetan anyway? You didn't tell him everything, just that—that and Sha-na-na. Are you leaning on that switch bar, Iz?"

Izzy looked up at her, looked away, licked his lips. "The knees, Fay. You're an angel—have I told you that lately?—an absolute angel in heaven. Push down the knees, honey."

"Okay, Iz. Keep me in the dark. Only sometimes I can hardly stand it. The person is sad, you know what I mean? Look at old Sergeant Ducky: how come he has to suffer so much? All he wants is a little female warmth—isn't that it? How come it takes an ad in a trans-dimensional pennysaver to get him that?"

"You make it sound so simple. Truth is, all this was in the cards way back when sexual reproduction got started. Amoebas don't need a mating ritual. Amoebas don't die of loneliness or longing. They just split: instant companionship. But once you got your gender divide, see, everything's on the table:

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you might mate, you might mate but badly, you might mate great, or now and then, or to beat the band, or *nada*."

"But sex is good, huh, Izzy, I mean in the big picture, for the hardiness of the species or whatever?"

"Yeah, that's what Darwin said, but, between you and me, he was full of beans. Move aside a little. I gotta scootch up some more."

She moved. He scootched.

"Well, what's it for then? Come on, Iz, tell me."

"The truth?"

"No, lie to me, you dope." She slapped his butt.

"Ouch! Sex? Sarvaduhka's hard time? All that?"

"Yeah. Tell me. Why? And don't go on and on, either, because I got ice cream melting I gotta put in the box."

"No problem. As for sex generally, your whole humiliating catastrophe of sex—present company excepted, of course—so happens it's a kind of gyroscope for the Milky Way Galaxy. Certain emanations are produced, Fay." Izzy winked. "Without them emanations, for one thing, all the stars would implode."

"Baloney."

"Yeah, well, if you think *that's* baloney, you should read the goddam physicists' explanations of why the stars don't implode, which they obviously should on account of their mammoth gravity and whatnot. Them quantum guys are working overtime to come up with new principles to explain it, your Pauli Exclusion hoohah, your Cosmological Constant, all that crapola. Rabbits out of a hat, Fay, as God is my witness. Deuces *ex machina* and no mistake!"

"*Deus,* you mean."

"Whatever. Fact is, it's sex. The reason the stars don't implode is nooky."

"Okay, let's say it's nooky. What about the Duke?"

"You heard of the butterfly effect?"

"Sure. A butterfly beats its wings in Skokie, and the weather changes over Prague. I heard of that."

"Everything fits, Fay. Everything has its effect. Out there somewhere, there's a comet with our name on it—unless a certain butterfly goes flippety-flippety."

"Sarvaduhka?"

"Could be, Fay. Could be."

"What's your part in all this, Izzy?"

"*Moi?* Oh Fay, you know me. I'm just a guy with his ear to the ground."

Sarvaduhka hardly noticed Delhi, cows, goats, kamikaze taxis, bikes, buses, motorized rickshas, camels, elephants, performing bears, street barbers, squatting fortune tellers, hookah-puffing tailors, pan wallahs hawking stuffed betel leaves, burros, timber-laden water buffalo, laundry drying on the sidewalks, hands, hands, empty hands stretched out for spare change . . . only *Inana!*

The plane from Delhi to Khajuraho was delayed. Take the train, then. There was one to Jhansi for about two hundred rupees. If he could make it there by 11:30, he could get on the Madhya Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation bus to Khajuraho and arrive before five PM Saturday. That left a night and a day to locate Tongyu Kargup and to find out where he was to meet Inana.

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Making the earliest train, though, could be dicey—it took so much energy for Sarvaduhka, while in India, not to be in India, his native India, to be with Inana solely and completely, despite the water buffalo, the sounds of Hindi and Tamil and the smell of savories and piss. He was not navigating well. He was frustrated by streets bisected by unmappable bazaars and by impenetrable traffic jams caused by overturned bullock carts.

At last he called Cousin Max, his Delhi cousin, old Uncle Ari's son, a taxi driver and black marketeer in miniature sacred statuary. "No time for small talk, Max. You must take me to the train to Jhansi. Never mind anything. I'm here, I'm gone! Nothing matters. Come get me now. Drop your fare and come. This is for female action."

Max hardly stopped the taxi as he threw open the passenger door. Sarvaduhka jumped in and yanked the door shut. Max hit the flag on his meter.

"What's that for, cousin?" said Sarvaduhka. "Are we not flesh and blood?"

"And if I were to stay at the Lucky Three?"

A knot formed in Sarvaduhka's throat. He was on the verge of an argument, but what was the point? It was only the result of allowing himself to stray from the thought of Inana.

"Jai," said Max, "did you say you have come for female action?" He leaned on the horn and floored the gas pedal; tire rubber burned the calluses from the heels of three shabby children. They scrambled after rolling, bouncing mangoes. Max looked back and shook his fist at them while he spoke to Sarvaduhka. "I can get you plenty, and there's no hurry, believe me. You don't have to wait in line! You can't find this in New York? Never mind, I am taking you there—unbelievable pussy!"

"No, no! Take me where I said, to the train station! I have to get to Jhansi to make the connection for Khajuraho."

A man hawking balloons leaned into Max's window when he slowed for a crossing truck. Max rolled up the window, forcing back the man's face, and the man shouted something in Arabic about Max's mother's privates. "You are looking for action with the statues, cousin? With the dirty statues? I have some of those too. I'll sell you cheap! You are my cousin and I love you!"

"I am not talking about vile things, Max. I am talking about f*emale action,* the whole business, the real thing! Like Uncle Ari used to say!"

"Female action? *Yaar,* you don't realize that my father had it all wrong? The sahib golfers in that ridiculous story of his, they didn't mean any of that at all, nothing sublime, sweetie! They just meant a piece of ass, Jai! Female action means a piece of ass!" Max roared with laughter as he headed for a cleft between two small buildings that could almost but not quite be called an alley. Rough brick sanded the chrome on both sides of Max's cab.

"Is this the way to the bus?"

"Bus? Train? I would take you to Khajuraho myself and charge you one half, well, two thirds, sweetie, but you are a bloody fool! Just like my father!" The cab lurched around a corner into a cloud of diesel smoke. "There is your bus. Go! Female action!" He hit his head against the steering wheel laughing.

Sarvaduhka paid him the fare—no tip—and made a dash for the bus.

On the bus, he nodded and drifted, his head sliding down the tinted glass, but on the train (he made it) he slept and dreamed. Was it a dream?

He is sitting in the front seat of a parked Mercedes-Benz, taking in that wonderful new car smell while he . . . drifts . . . off. What kind of a dream could that be, to dream of falling asleep? The driver's side window is three

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quarters closed, the open quarter sealed with duct tape and shirt cardboards except for a little spot where a tube pokes through, one and a half inch inner diameter.

Sleep, sleep . . .

In another dream a truck swerves just before it hits his father, who subsequently takes him to a house of prostitution expressly to introduce him to the mysteries of female action, and he lives happily ever after, until a comet hits the South China Sea and everything is vaporized. Sleep, sleep . . . but that doesn't seem to be the end of things. No, being vaporized is like falling asleep and dreaming, it turns out, and here is what he dreams:

That Tongyu Kargup never is able to find his father's house. He wanders up and down narrow streets, and no one will talk to him or give him directions, because he is so obviously and extravagantly crazy. Finally he falls in love with a water buffalo, sings to it, offers it food, fondles it, pleads with its owner to let him have it alone for an hour, just an hour, because it is actually a *tulku,* the incarnation of a great master of his sect, who is destined to drive out the Chinese devils and rebuild the Temple of Endless and Divine Copulation, et cetera. He forgets all about Sarvaduhka. He stays right there, a Pyramus to that water buffalo's Thisbe, right up to the moment that a comet plunges into the Bay of Bengal this time, and the whole earth blows away like beer foam.

Sleep, sleep . . . What is all this comet *pup'hula,* Sarvaduhka wonders groggily? In another dream that unfolds, pulling him in like air whooshing into a coffee can at the prick of the opener, Izzy has an indestructible back, becomes a furniture mover actually. Sarvaduhka never meets him, and, on that account, is happy as a lark, married and with a succession of pretty mistresses too, just like his fat cat cousins. Until the comet hits.

What is this strange equation—Sarvaduhka happy or the earth survives, but never both? Aw, it must be the twisted logic of the Land of Nod. The actual God in heaven could not be so unfair.

Sleep, sleep . . .

The 5:30 train arrived in Khajuraho at 8:00. Sarvaduhka woke feeling drugged and leaden. The fishes were swimming on both sides of his eyelids now. *Inana!* was his first thought. He threaded his way to the dharmashala—all the locals knew it—barely noticing the temples he passed along the way. Throughout Khajuraho, he found, Tongyu Kargup's name had its effect: people lowered their heads or snickered or took offense.

Tongyu Kargup wasn't at the dharmashala, and no one there could be bothered to say where he might be. But I only have until tomorrow dusk, Sarvaduhka said. Really, what's that to us? they said, this city is full of crazy people like her—and maybe you are one of them! Her? said Sarvaduhka, but they clammed up then; they lowered their heads.

He wandered through the streets like Tongyu Kargup in the dream, nodding on his feet and bumping into pillars, trusting his fate to his thunderbolt. Along the way he queried people who looked like they might know a Tibetan tantric holyman. They lowered their heads. They snickered. They took offense. Her? they said. You want her?

Strangers to Khajuraho always end up at the famous temples. Everything shunts them that way; it takes a will to be elsewhere, and Sarvaduhka's was draining fast. Jet lag and bipolar disorder swelled up against the insides of his eyes; they squeezed out rational thought like liquid from a

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cheese press. At some point he had pulled off his shoes, he discovered: ox dung squished between his toes. At some other point, apparently, he had passed through a temple gate. The slap and peel of his soiled bare feet echoed through a vast space.

Wake up, wash your face, someone whispered—and he realized it was himself. He made his way to a door with a triangle on it.

But as he leaned his elbows against the edge of the basin in the western-style tourist comfort station off one of the temple courtyards, his image in the water went black. Who is that troubled fellow, he had been wondering? Now it was perfectly dark. He heard gates click. He brailled his way to the washroom door.

"Hey!" His face was wet. His feet were bare. He heard jingling keys, ursine yawns, and fading chuckling voices. "Hey! I'm still in here!" Gates clanged shut and echoed.

Sarvaduhka trudged through the temple in the dark. He could see only the barest details now, penises mostly, and breasts, but also flying angels and dancing maidens. Every one of the penises had at least a couple of breasts in attendance, and some had more; some had airborne ones, in fact. How had he not seen them before? Ah, Inana samadhi! What was Khajuraho to that?

But now his power of concentration had hit the skids. He was exhausted. With every step, with every breast and lingam stroked, adding his bit of degenerative moisture to the sweat of generations past, Sarvaduhka felt smaller and sadder. That old cross, his family name, weighed on him again—*Sarvaduhka, all sorrow. . . .*

And he was back in his dead father's room. His mother had just sent Tongyu Kargup away. It was dark like this. He heard his mother talking, shrieking, arguing, sometimes over the telephone and sometimes at the door. In her fervor to protect him, she had forgotten all about him.

On his dead father's desk sat a soapstone Ganesha, a garlanded elephant with arms like a sunburst. Every one of the countless hands held a wonderful tool, intricately faceted, with which to solve a little boy's problems when his father was dead. In Ganesha's lap sat a woman dressed only in bracelets and beads. She had big breasts. Her legs circled his hips. She caressed him. She kissed him. Her lips stretched toward Ganesha like the stem of a fig.

"Caress *me*. Kiss *me*," Sarvaduhka used to pray.

He kept taking that statue and his mother kept making him put it back, but at last Sarvaduhka had won. Now it was on the dashboard of his VW in Buffalo, New York. It gave him scant pleasure.

Sarvaduhka heard the sound of the gate unlatching, then voices and footfalls. Flashlight beams danced about, but he lacked the will to move. In flickers he saw the stone men placidly smiling and the women servicing them like celestial shoeshine girls.

Oh, that is how women should be! That is how they *must* be for Sarvaduhka to have access to same. That damned daddy of his had been clipped by a truck and had broken his neck against a curbstone before he had had time to initiate him, as daddies ought, into the mysteries of female action.

"That's it, into a fugue, Jai baby!"

Up on the rooftop—loose grit and peeling tarpaper—old One-brow paced while the screw machine presses clanked below. Half his mind was with

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Sarvaduhka in Khajuraho, half on the comet, and many other halves elsewhere in and out of this world. He couldn't move Sarvaduhka's fingers or thoughts right now, but he could feel them. For Izzy it was a commonplace to know others' thoughts; his mind was like a police radio that way.

Sarvaduhka was a special project. Sarvaduhka was the reason for Izzy's bad back, actually. Izzy had developed back problems in order to get laid off at the factories, which would force him to take temp jobs, one of which would land him at the Lucky Three as night manager, because that's where he would meet Sarvaduhka, who ran the place.

"But you can't just 'develop' back problems," Fay would complain many years hence, when all the cats were out of their bags. "Something has to be the cause of it, something that happened *before,* not something that's gonna happen later on."

By then Iz would be over his rapturous involvement with her toes and ankles and into her succulent hint of a double chin—what a delectable morsel that, for love nips. He would kiss and suck just short of leaving a hickey, then say through tenuously wired false teeth and whistling gaps in a bridge or two, "Read Aristotle on 'final causes,' sweet stuff. You got it a little wrong. Or read Alfy Bester's 'Pi Man': helluva story. Guy goes flouncing around like steam bubbles on a hot griddle, talking different languages, killing, making love, whatever—to keep the universe in balance. That ain't really the fiction, though, Fay. The fiction is that it's only this one guy. Truth is, that's what we're all doing."

And another time: "Everybody's on the Big Payroll, Fay, from Albert Schweitzer to the Marquis de Sade. Only, they don't know what they're really working on or who's really signing their paycheck. It's like in gin rummy when somebody knocks and suddenly all them points in your hand that you been collecting for Aunt Tilly the cardshark's comeuppance, they have a completely different meaning. *Kapeesh?*"

Up on the rooftop, Izzy tossed a stone over the gutter and heard it cluck far below against the pavement. Did Sarvaduhka know that he was on the Big Payroll? That all his sorrows (*sarva duhka*) were for a purpose? That the terrible longings that wracked him and curled his life like gift ribbon under a thumbnail were for some greater end? No. Of course not. Who knew things like that? Only Izzy. Subtract a boy's father at the crucial moment, charge up his libido, then dangle Kathak nymphets, gopi girls, cinema queens in endless succession before him, play a bit with the brain chemistry for a little *sturm und drang,* and hey presto!

A white Mercedes.

But don't tell him that. Telling would spoil it all—everything has its effect.

There were so few opportunities to jimmy the works, really, and even then the effects were not altogether certain. Like pinball. The steel ball bounces, falls, rolls, and only now and then hits a lever, and then you have to get it at just the right angle with just the right momentum, tolerance equal maybe to the breadth of a butterfly's wing over Skokie.

The other morning had been an example. What with Sarvaduhka's libido in overdrive it took Izzy the tiniest psychic flutter—scarcely the lick of a lizard's tongue—and Sarvaduhka was staring at the lump in the counterpane and thinking, "Tongyu Kargup!"

The sky was clear for a moment, an odd event near Lake Ontario, but Izzy was busy looking at stone phalluses through Sarvaduhka's red and dilated

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weepers. Like Telemachus was Sarvaduhka on his Little Odyssey. And now in this erotic Hades he communed with his dead father's shade. (Oh, that truck accident—had that been necessary? Yes—either that or an unexpected dumpling in the East China Sea.)

Good, a fugue! Think of your father. Down and down you spiral, far from home. You're investing every spiritual penny on this enterprise, ain't you, Duke? Out on a limb you are, on a twig, and on a bud. . . .

"Izzy! Izzy, you lop-fingered free-loading son of a lawn ornament and a bitch in heat, will you get your dumb ass down to the vat before I ream it and thread it and screw it to the goddam wall?"

Szbarsky. The break had only just ended. That barmaid must have finally dearjohned him.

Sarvaduhka lingered before a statue of a man embracing a woman as though she were a fireman's pole that he was sliding down. It was dark: she was a woman, she was a fireman's pole, she was a tree. . . .

A few days before the truck hit Daddy, little Jai had been playing in the shadow of a stout tree, the oldest of a small grove of mangoes out of sight of the grownups. The grownups were picnicking on *barfi* and *jalebi* and other delectables that on that day, mysteriously, had no attraction for Jai. That day his blood filled him as if it were a hot foreign liquid that pulsed in his throat, his chest, his loins. Who had poured it there, he wondered? His tree winked at Jai through red flowers peeking out between the dense, glossy leaves. The heat of that strange fluid and the enticement of the tree were too much for him. He was tingling with impossible, uncontainable electricity. He opened wide his arms and rammed the mango's trunk with his own. The bald force of it closed his arms around the tree as a hardball closes the catcher's fingers.

Again. Again.

"Jai?" His father was standing behind him as Sarvaduhka hugged the mango tree. Little Jai's hot cheek rubbed the bark. His breath pumped loud through lips crushed against the tree's rough skin. At the sound of his father's voice the electricity in his breast and belly turned to pain. He was covered with scratches under torn clothes. "Jai? Oh, you boy! You are a boy, aren't you! What crazy boy thing are you doing with that poor mango? Let me see you."

Jai did not look but kept his hot cheek to his tree. His father had to peel him away. Then Jai felt his father's big hand on his little one, and he saw his father's feet. He couldn't look up at his face just yet. He was still breathing hard.

"Is this your beloved, Jai?" he laughed. "Listen, don't do this again. With mischief like this you will scare away even a tree. You must let your beloved come a little bit to you, *na?* Don't run so, my son. Look, you've bloodied your clothes, you, you *boy,* you!" He laughed again. It was like sweet syrup, but Sarvaduhka still couldn't look. "Tomorrow we'll talk some more. Now come, let your mother shout at you a little."

Tomorrow and the next day, Sarvaduhka's father was busy, and the day after that he was killed. So what had Sarvaduhka learned about female action? Too much or not enough! He would be cowed by the terrible advances of the Kathak girls, and that was only the beginning.

Sarvaduhka heard movement echoing from some indeterminate direction. . . .

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"Perfect," cried Izzy. "Great timing."

"What're you jawjacking about, Molson?" said Szbarsky, leaning an ear toward the degreasing vat.

"Nothing, boss. How's your love life?"

"It stinks. Just get to work, wouldjas?"

. . . he spun about, surveying through his tears the surrounding temple: dark, dark, dark. *They are coming for me. I have traveled halfway round the world to make a bloody fool of myself in a hall full of dirty statues. Why, Daddy?*

The flashlight came closer and shined directly into his eyes, blinding him to everything but its smear of white light. His head dropped forward as if the tendons had been sliced. The splash of light turned to red dancing paisleys, then faded. Before him on the carelessly flashlit tiles Sarvaduhka saw a pair of sandaled feet. He stared at them for a long while. The skin all over the front of his body burned as if he had been rubbing mango trees. He couldn't bring himself to look up.

Then someone cackled sharply, like a cat spitting up a furball. At last Sarvaduhka lifted his head. An old woman in a ragged sari stood before him, laughing. It was an obscene little laugh that sounded like bilge bubbling up through a pipe. Her hair was as stiff and bristly as straw poking out the hole in a rustic mat.

"I just got out of jail," she said in oddly accented English. "Now I have to help you get out of here, and they will probably jail me again. In and out! In and out!" That's what she was saying, and Sarvaduhka could hardly believe that things had taken such a turn that he should be found in a felonious position in a temple court with dirty statues after hours. "In and out!" the hag said. "Life is like that! Sex is like that! I myself am like that—Tongyu Kargup."

Sarvaduhka snapped to attention. "Did you say Tongyu Kargup? You quote Tongyu Kargup? Do you know him? Can you tell me where he is?"

"You misunderstood me, mister! I said that I myself am like that—I myself, Tongyu Kargup. I am Tongyu Kargup. Perhaps you would like to copulate?"

"*Inana!*" The sound broke from him like a sleeper wave, pulling him under and out to sea. He fell to his knees.

"Calm! Calm!" The holyman paused, sighed, pouted. "My disciples told me you were looking for *me.* So it's Inana you're after, for God knows why. Well, all orifices are one, after all, so I won't begrudge you that."

"My dream was true then? You'll lead me to her?"

"Oh, well, that's another matter. Finding people is often quite difficult—that's my experience. Take yourself. You were wandering about like a blind madman, and I am not as young as I was when I first answered your Personals ad." Tongyu Kargup batted his long false eyelashes. His eyes wandered over the statuary, and he seemed to be conducting an imaginary orchestra with his left forefinger, something leisurely, maybe a Viennese waltz. "Do you really have thick hair, not just on head but all over one's tight little body? That's what it said on the kiosk in Lhasa. Please let go my hem. Thank you." The holyman clucked his tongue. Sarvaduhka stumbled to his feet, jet-lagged to the marrow and addled by love, his eyes fireflies in a hollow log. "Calm yourself. Have you ever fished for marlin? Wait, I know:

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would you like me to give you a mantram? But perhaps you already have some practice: an intelligent person like yourself—Vipassana would be my guess."

"Vipassana's sad."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing! Nothing! It's just something I say! It's 'The person is sad,' though, not 'Vipassana,' for heaven's sake—you see what a state I am in! Please, sir, tell me, where is Inana? I know that you know this! I had an insight that you would help me with your *siddhis,* with your holy powers! I am to meet her tomorrow dusk."

"Bonbon?" Tongyu Kargup reached inside the folds of his sari and produced a round tin of gumdrops. He took two bonbons for himself, then offered the tin to Sarvaduhka.

Sarvaduhka felt an itch, not on his skin or anywhere inside his skin, but in his soul. He hit his head against a fluted column. It seemed the only way to scratch *there.* Ah! He hit his head again, again! Ah! The hitting shook tears out of him. "I should have asked Izzy! I was too proud! You are a madman, and I, I am a bloody fool! He could have warned me of all this!"

"You know Izzy? Izzy Molson? You have met him, Jai?" Tongyu Kargup curled his fingers around Sarvaduhka's wrist, startling him from his soliloquy.

"Met him? He was night clerk at my Lucky Three motel, a temp, for pity's sake. We did many things together, all no good. Once he gave me a very large check drawn on a bank near Alpha Centauri, I think: it was no bloody good. Another time he made me drive him to the desert in order to meet his wife Fay for the first time, his wife of umpteen years already, sir, so they would not be married without ever having met, and he left me there, sir! He left me in the desert, and I had to take a Greyhound bus and lose significant revenue at the Three! He made me go with him to Memphis, Egypt, once—Memphis, Egypt! I had thought he meant Tennessee. I regret everything. His wife Fay is a good cook though. . . ."

"Aieee! You ate at Izzy's table, Jai? Before the Chinese drove us out, this Izzy was revered throughout the Himalayas. In many forms his image was venerated, sometimes merely by a symbol of his numinous presence—a golden bar representing the holy eyebrow, one and long. . . ."

"It's greying." Sarvaduhka wrinkled his nose.

". . . sometimes it was a statue of a crushed vertebra surmounted by a nimbus."

"You mean, by a numskull. Please stop speaking of Izzy. Izzy is of no importance. I am here because of Inana. I've got to find her by tomorrow dusk. I thought you could help me, but it seems I was as crazy as your venerable self."

"Oh, time-bound one!" Tongyu Kargup raised one finger. He had three gaudy rings on it, and he had allowed the nail to grow until it started to curl like an apple peeling. He touched his finger to the ground—the mudra of Calling The Whole Earth To Witness. "I am not such a seer as Izzy Molson—*Asamkha kotis,* a very exceedingly large number, of obeisances to same!—but I am a seer, Jai, and I am not mad, no, not quite. I see all couplings of sentient beings, of *pretas, asuras,* animals, humans, *devas,* and *bodhisattvas,* including also *pratyekabuddhas* and many lesser beings, both male and female. Such is my discipline, the practice of my lineage: I see all conjunctions of whatsoever beings, born of eggs, born without eggs, born of

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moisture, born of thought, or undying and unborn. When they couple I see them, past, present, and future—all are the same to me.

"And, Jai, I do not see you and Inana—except for that once, of course."

Sarvaduhka stood. "What are you saying? We've made love already? This can't be. Tell me where I am to meet her, and damn the rest."

"At the same place."

"I know that. She said that. Where is the same place, please? Time may be all one to you, sir, but to me it's running out. It has been four years with no female action, and I cannot live without a woman, sir, cannot live, cannot live." Sarvaduhka felt the truth of his own words. He was starving for a touch, a word, a breath of the Feminine, not to mention a squeeze, a smack, a hump. In four years' time unwilling celibacy could carve a man out deeply. Tap him and he echoes. Hug him and he kinks like an old garden hose.

Tongyu Kargup shook his head. "It's a good thing you are stuck in here, Jai. In the state you are in you could get yourself into a good deal of trouble. Perhaps I should leave you here and let my disciples bathe me at one of my ashrams—they keep ashrams for me, the darlings! Does Izzy have ashrams?"

"I hope your disciples drown you!"

"What is the big bloody to-do about this Inana, dear boy? You had her four years ago, Jai. You let her slip away and have barely thought about her since—tell the truth."

Sarvaduhka sat down again and began to cry in earnest.

He remembered her: the girl in Troy, New York. They had met at the coffee machine of the *Slumber Bunny,* his second cousin Vishnu's motel, which the locals called "Sweat Hog Heaven." He remembered the perfume, the eyes—brown, not blue—and the fascination with India that had been Sarvaduhka's ticket to ride. Unkempt, his cousins would say of her hair, sandy brown, straggling and twisting about her shoulders, with a few braids peeking out like garden snakes from a thicket, but her youth and the coy glitter of her eyes flavored it differently. Wild, it said, mischievous, ready to wrap and blanket you. She wore a denim vest over a loose white shirt with embroidery around the neck—from India. She was barefoot. He remembered her standing by the glass door sipping from a Styrofoam poker-hand cup and watching the snow fall. When he came into the little coin machine foyer from the connecting corridor, she gave him such a boldly lingering look that Sarvaduhka blushed and turned away. Hot in the face, he managed his quarter and dime. He had the most alarming urge to kiss the coin slot.

Now, on the wrong side of the temple gate, Sarvaduhka remembered the terrible Darjeeling blend that had sprayed into the Styrofoam cup with the poker hand on the bottom. He knew that she was still looking at him. He temporized. He sipped. It snowed. Let her make the first move—that's the safest thing for the foreign-born.

And she had obliged. "Oh, you got the tea too," she had said. "*Tea too!* Will you listen to me! *Tea too!* I sound pretty silly, don't I? You're from India, huh? You have that beautiful skin. You all drink tea, don't you, just like the English? I mean, you all drink *tea too.*" She giggled endearingly. Her torso caved in slightly when she laughed, as if to invite Sarvaduhka to occupy the cavity thus formed. "What do you have? I have two fours."

He didn't know which question to answer first. Sarvaduhka held his cup up high in order to see the bottom. "Flush! All diamonds!"

"You win!" She laid her hand on his chest playfully, then left it there.

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Sarvaduhka smiled. "I know a place where we can get some real tea, if you like tea—I mean, if you like *tea too!*" What an idiot! He died right there, between Inana and the vending machine, with her hand on his chest and everything. Everything went black, and his life flashed before him. He started to hear that heavenly choir.

Then she laughed. She had liked his joke! She liked him—even talking. He said, "We would have to walk a little bit in the snow, but they have wonderful *barfi* and *jalebi*."

"My name's Nan. What's yours?"

"Dick."

"Let's go, Dick."

They went. He knew that "Dick" was short for "Sarvaduhka," of course—it was his own invention—but he never guessed that "Nan" was short for "Inana." Her father and mother must have been hippies, or else she herself was a hippie and she had made it up herself. She made love like a hippie, with abandon. The very next morning, she disappeared like a hippie too.

That had been four years ago. Now he had less than a day to meet her "at the same place," i.e., at the *Slumber Bunny* in Troy, New York—about ten thousand miles away.

"The person is sad!" he sighed, and all at once Sarvaduhka remembered with a shock where he had first heard those words.

He had been in bed with Nan at the *Slumber Bunny,* crankily post coitum. He had been lying beside her, staring up at the swirls of plaster on the ceiling—cheaper to plaster it that way than smooth, said Vishnu—and he'd wondered out loud, "What brought you to me, you strange girl?"

That's when she had said, "The person is sad."

"What is sad?" But she was already snoring.

Now Sarvaduhka realized that she had never said that at all. He had misheard her because her actual words had been incomprehensible to him at the time. What she had actually said was, "Your Personals ad."

> . . . the ruggedly handsome Skipper B'shucks, a veteran of uncountable missions ([SYMBOL: aleph sub-1] to be exact) through intergalactic and dimensional interstices, granted the *Inter-Dee* a rare interview aboard an actual catastrophe-tracking vessel on assignment in deep spacetime. From the control deck, where we sipped mulled zoot-rot and nibbled fricassee of Cytherean brain stem stewed in the cataclysm of parallel world [SYMBOL: pi] + 3i, the Skipper invited your correspondent to examine the famous "tabletop formation" on Comet Götterdämmerung, as it will have come to be known, as readers will recall, if, as occurs in most of these timechannels, it does utterly destroy the earth (and a couple of other inner planets).
>
> "Is it true," we asked, "that the rock crystal and ice structures we are now viewing—structures that have the exact shape, including the curved edges and the retractable sprung leaves and the ornate black-enameled borders and the chips and the cleanser-scratched dull spots, of a metal kitchen tabletop—appeared in conjunction with the posting of an *Inter-Dee* Personals ad from the very planet whose annihilation you are tracking?"
>
> The terse and laconic Skipper B'shucks palpated his/her foothills as he/she pondered his/her response. At last he/she turned toward us with the intensity and candor of a mudslide and said simply, "Yuh." (This was the local event. The breakdown of the skipper's responses across the various timechannels is as follows:)

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Utterance by B'Shucks	Number of Channels
"Yuh"	3%
"No"	2%
"Say, what?" (Includes "Huh?")	71%
"Not as I've heard of."	5%
"Yes, and it so happens I replied to that ad. We met. We fell in love. We got married. I was all in white lace, pinnacle to foothills. He was dressed in silk—you never saw a being so lovely. You should have seen his attractive mustaches and thick hair, not just on his head, I mean, but all over his tight little body. He will have died in the collision. I don't wanna talk about it anymore."	12%
"Beats the hell out of me."	5%
OTHER	2%

But, when confronted with the information, obtained by your *Inter-Dee* correspondent on condition of strict anonymity from one Tongyu Kargup in a little-frequented timechannel in the high-order powers of three, to the effect that a movement was afoot, or would be afoot, to interdict Comet Götterdämmerung's collision with earth, and that the tabletop and Personals ad might be intimately associated with same, Skipper B'shucks responded, uniformly on all timechannels, "Ah, I wouldn't be surprised. They don't tell me shit. But this I know—the Duke loved me (/loves me/will love me)."

And then, "I bet this has something to do with that sonuvabitch Izzy." Or, in some tc's, "Everybody's on the Big Payroll, I suppose."

"What's that paper you're reading, Izzy?" Szbarsky settled down on the edge of the loading dock right next to old One-brow. He was sounding a little conciliatory today. Izzy picked up a number of causes—the wife had raised her eyebrow at breakfast in a way that he took to mean that she might be unfaithful, he had a pain in his side that he felt sure was cancer, and he had just gotten a gigantic order for an expensive screw machine part and realized that it wasn't making him happy, that his heart wasn't in it, and that he maybe wanted to join a commune somewhere if they still had them.

"*Inter-Dee,*" said Iz.

"Looks like it's got some kind of classifieds there, huh? Some kind of Per-

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sonals or what have you?" Szbarsky tried to look casual as he unscrewed the cup from his thermos. "They got communes listed in there? Are them communes still going, looking for communards or whatever?"

"Naw. They're all washed up, Szbarsky. I was just reading about the end of the world in this here."

"Aw, they're always saying that. It's their goddam job."

"Yeah, they gotta sell their papers, don't they?"

"Yeah, everybody's on the Big Payroll."

"What?" Izzy clapped his paper shut and stared at the man.

"The Big Payroll. That's what they say anyhow. That everybody's on it."

"I suppose."

"'Man's extremity is God's opportunity!'" declared the holyman Tongyu Kargup. His bangles clicked as he stroked Sarvaduhka's bowed head and dried Sarvaduhka's tears with a jasmine-scented hanky. He whistled into the darkness behind him, and an ancient security guard shuffled forward, preceded by the glare of his flashlight. With every other step he sighed and twitched in his uniform, which, in its dishevelment, could have been a great wrinkled eyelid. He looked extremely put out.

Tongyu Kargup slapped him on the back. "Doesn't our reverend brother Sarvaduhka look like he's profited, sir? But, of course, again, sir, we are sorry he was so stupid as to linger after the closing. Maybe he fell asleep in the shadow of the Shiva lingam in the far court." He turned to Sarvaduhka and winked furiously. "Is that what happened, darling?"

"No. I have no idea what happened. In fact, I have no idea about anything at all. I'm a total blank. My life has evaporated. I once had a sweetheart, and now I have none. There is nothing left to me but tear stains, and now the tear stains are rubbing away."

"You see?" said Tongyu Kargup. "I told you he has profited!"

The guard did not seem to follow. "Let's get out of here, yah? Didn't I do you a favor by letting you in this way in the first place, great saintly one? And then you wander off and leave me to scour the place for you. You two may be holy people, but me, I'm an ordinary man, I'm not getting any younger here, and I think I should be allowed to have my sleep."

Tongyu Kargup took Sarvaduhka under his shaven, perfumed, and braceleted arm. He let the guard take the lead while he himself shuffled behind with Sarvaduhka.

"You are in despair, but that is not so bad," Tongyu Kargup whispered, pulling him along. "Come, come, Sarvaduhka, wipe away your tears. You too are on the Big Payroll, you know."

"The Big Payroll?" Sarvaduhka mumbled.

"Come, I will take you back to America myself. I always wanted to see it. Is there still Flower Power and Love Not War? You must introduce me to Izzy. You can arrange an invitation, yes? Then you can go marlin fishing. It will do you a world of good."

In his mind, dark and lusterless as the place where cracks in the floorboards drain, where gum wrappers collect below sewer grates, where old newspapers blow, Sarvaduhka thought he glimpsed a white Mercedes-Benz. Good car, the Mercedes, his cousin's favorite. A glint seemed to come from the chrome ring of the tailpipe extension. Now he could see it all, sunroof to undercarriage. With exquisite precision he measured the distance from the lip of the exhaust pipe to the driver's side window. It would only take a few

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dollars' worth of tubing, if that, and he could see, limned in phosphors behind his eyes, just how to pack the window tight around the business end. . . .

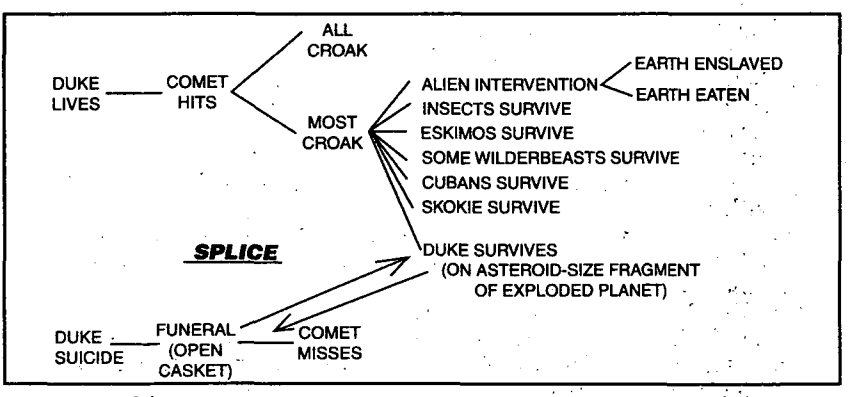
Izzy didn't cry over Sarvaduhka. He climbed down into his basement and holed himself up in the room of shrunken whitewashed boards that used to be a coal bin. He pulled the string that turned on the dangling naked forty-watter. He shut the door and latched it; scabs of whitewash peeled and fell to the floor, making a thin clatter. The window, broken now, through which big trucks once funneled coal was covered with crumbling yellowed newspaper—maps of Normandy, maps of the South Pacific, curving arrows and screaming headlines—and duct tape. Iz sat down on a stack of moldering clothes in corrugated cardboard boxes as limp as dunked graham crackers.

He closed his eyes, and the comet hit. The sky burned. The ocean boiled. Then everything stopped, like a movie when the film breaks. Now Izzy's mind was a multiplex. In his mind, he stepped out into the corridor, into the smell of popcorn and the sparkle of pinlights: what's playing in the other theaters, he wondered?

All the movies were variations of the same comet disaster flick, actually. In the one next door chunks of the earth were breaking away and flying into space as the Moon was once supposed to have done out of the Pacific. Some of the movies had the entire island of Cuba sailing off into the blue-black sky. In others everybody was stir fried by cataclysmic outpourings of heat and kinetic energy. In one or two, the insects carried on.

He was looking for a particular movie. It took him a long time, it seemed, what with all those doors to check, all that popcorn to nibble, all those teenage ushers to charm into letting him peek in, ah, but what was time in Izzyland?

Between peeks he sketched on a napkin he'd boosted from the popcorn stand, compiling this diagram:



And then he found the movie he'd been looking for. It was the story of a man with attractive mustaches and thick hair, not just on his head but all over his tight little body, how he was ripped off the earth on his own private chunk when the comet struck.

He didn't live long. The fellow was somewhat protected by the VW square-back he squatted in, terrified, but Nature abhors a vacuum after all, and above a certain altitude the great empty cosmos turned a green eye on the contents of the car and of the fellow, both liquids and solids, and it bellowed, "Share!"

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Old One-brow shot into the projectionist's booth—an old pal he was—and had the guy run the film backward and forward around the moment of the fellow's death. "Again! Again!" said Izzy, while the paying customers furrowed their single brows and shook their lop-fingered fists toward the little square hole whence light danced into their particular plex. At last Iz marked the spot precisely, committing to memory what came before, at T-minus-three and minus-two and minus-one. He marked the progress of a collar button's shadow on the hairy fellow's neck, thread by thread till zero.

Iz glanced at his diagram. "That's where I gotta splice," he muttered. The projectionist nodded darkly, pinching his lips and raising his long single brow.

Then Izzy checked out some other movies.

Slowly the smells of grease, solder flux, and mildew cut into his mind, and he was in the old coal bin again. Fay was calling to him down through the floor: "Oh my God! Izzy! Come up here to the phone quick, honey, please. It's some car rental place wants to know about the Duke and a car he's rented."

"So?" he shouted up through the ceiling of bare beams and little x's of two-by-fours holding them parallel against all splits and shifts the long years since wood was cheap. He squeezed his eyes shut against Fay's answer like someone expecting a gunshot.

"He's late on returning it, Iz. He gave our names as a reference, Iz."

"So?"

Her voice was ragged, nearly a shriek, but Iz knew what she was going to say anyway. "It was a Mercedes, a white Mercedes."

Izzy and Fay folded laundry just outside the kitchen by the arch that separated the living room from the dining room, such as living and dining were *chez* Izzy. They did a sort of minuet with a blue bedsheet, pulling it wide, then meeting at the middle, corner to corner, edge to edge, then rotating it and folding again, tra la!

Tongyu Kargup sat in Izzy's orgone booth in the white seersucker business suit he had acquired for this trip to America. He dialed numbers one after the other and laughed. Sometimes he picked up one of the legs from the collapsed table, rubbed it between his own legs, and smiled a beatific gap-toothed smile. His eyes glittered like two crackled marbles.

Fay didn't like it. "How long's he gonna stay here, Izzy? He gives me the willies. He doesn't give a hang about people living or dying, does he, Izzy?"

"No."

"And that booth—it isn't even hooked up, is it?"

"Well, there's hooked up and there's hooked up, snookums." Izzy bussed her on the cheek.

Fay sighed. Her end of the bedsheet sagged. "I can't stop thinking about the Duke."

"Fold, Fay."

"How come you were so far off about him, Iz? You said he'd never . . ."

"Fold, Fay. Even Izzovision gets a bad channel now and then."

"Ah, but Iz . . ."

"Fold."

"You're right."

Inana knocked but didn't wait for anybody to answer the door. She just walked in in her sheer Madras print dress and transparent plastic pumps. "Hi, Iz, Fay, Your Holiness." She sighed. "The person is sad."

They said nothing. Tongyu Kargup dialed and sniggered. Fay and Izzy

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folded another sheet. Inana took an envelope from her purse and laid it down on a settee. "Thanks, Izzy, but I don't think I want to keep this."

"You read it, though?"

"Yeah. I walked around the block a few times, and I read it. Who writes love letters anymore? Makes a girl blush, all right. I don't have sea-blue eyes, though. Poor guy. He had that great dark skin, too, I'll never forget."

Fay stopped folding for a moment. "You aren't sorry we looked you up, are you, honey?"

"Looked me up? Is that what you call it when Izzy comes to somebody in a dream and draws a street map? No, I'm not sorry. I had a definite karmic connection with Dick. We were lovers, you know. Only it wasn't meant for more than that one night, I guess. I had to get back to Bronxville for a class. They take class attendance pretty seriously at Sarah Lawrence, you know. I suppose I should have left him a note."

"You did." Tra, la, Izzy folded.

"Oh, that. But four years later. Just an ad in the Westchester Save-A-Nickel, in the Missed Opportunities section of the Personals. One in a million shot. Who'd have guessed it would be shunted off to the *Inter-Tee?*"

"*Inter-Dee.*"

"Whatever. Doesn't matter now, does it? And he never showed." Inana sat down on the battered dun brown sofa. Its ancient springs complained just as they always did for Fay and Izzy when they got in the mood. Conditioned response: Izzy tilted his head in Fay's direction and smiled that smile, but Fay was drenched in melancholy. Inana kicked off her pumps and settled into the lumpy cushions with a long sigh. "You can't fiddle with fate, is the lesson I get out of this. I did just what you told me, Izzy, then and now, but look what it got him."

Fay froze. "What Izzy told you? Then and now?"

Izzy looked like he'd just sucked a lemon garnished with jalapeños. He looked urgently at Inana, but she was shutting her eyes for a nice yawn.

"Sure," she said. "He told me to check out that Save-A-Nickel in the first place. You know what a charmer your guy is, Fay. He was visiting what's-his-name when what's-his-name was attending a colloquium on the Fermat thing at Sarah Lawrence. . . ."

"Willie?" Fay looked daggers and bludgeons at Izzy. He sweated a little—and smiled. "Izzy's son Willie? Professor Molson?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Nice guy. Smart as hell, but a little straitlaced, I'm thinking. Anyway . . ." She yawned again. Izzy tried subtle semaphore, throat-clearing, winks. "Anyway, that's where I met your Iz. . . ."

"My Iz!" Distant rolling thunder was Fay's voice, and her face was heat lightning behind a murderous smile.

Tongyu Kargup looked up from the phone. "Is something burning?"

"Yeah, I went to the colloquium." Inana went on. She lifted her legs onto the sofa and snuggled in. "Hadn't picked a major yet. Math seemed pretty good. Yuch! But what did I know, right? Anyway, there's Iz at the Q&A. He spots me over Danish. . . ."

"My Iz!"

Izzy folded. "Fay, this is not what it sounds like. . . ."

"He spots me over Danish. He doesn't want me to get the wrong idea, but am I involved with someone, he wants to know, because I seem like just exactly the kind of number some guy was looking for in this ad he happened to see in the Westchester Save-A-Nickel, which I really ought to take a peek at it."

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"What a guy, my Iz! Always thinking of others." Fay yanked the sheet out of Izzy's hands.

"Yeah, that was my impression. So I took a peek. Funny damn ad. No nine hundred number. No box number. Just this address and a time. It was a motel."

"A motel!" Tongyu Kargup leapt from his little round seat, bumping his head on the lintel of the phone booth door. "I am very fond of motels in America. People fornicate there, yes?"

Inana ignored him. "Well, I wasn't afraid. I can take care of myself—always could. And I was right. Izzy was right. It was nice. But just for a night, I mean—God, I'm sleepy. Just one night was all that was in my job description, you might say. Everybody's on the Big Payroll." She yawned with grotesque abandon, all tongue, tonsils, and armpit.

"The Big Payroll, huh? Sounds like an Izzy."

"Uh huh."

"And then, four years later, Izzy had you send him that other note?"

"Mmhmm. Didn't take much persuasion. He was so nice, that Dick. Maybe he was a two-night kind of a guy, I'm figuring, not just one. It was so nice of Izzy to put me in mind of him again. Excuse me. I gotta close these eyes awhile."

"Not here, dear. Use my bed," said Fay.

"Huh? Oh, thanks." Inana peeled herself off the sofa and dragged herself in the direction Fay pointed.

Kargup had reached the laundry basket. Fay turned to him abruptly. "You get back in the booth, dammit." She threw down her sheet.

He got.

"And you, Izzy, talk. You set up this whole thing, didn't you? Inana and Kargup and the *Inter-Dee*. Why? Did you know it was gonna end this way?"

"Look around you, Fay. Do you see the earth and air vaporizing and everybody flopping like beached fish while their skin fizzes and their brains boil?"

"What are you saying?" she yelled.

"Fay, honey, I love you like barnacles love ship bottoms. You better sit down for this."

"No."

"Okay. Whatever. I love you—just remember that." He sucked in a long slow breath, held it a second, then blurted, "He's not dead."

"Not dead? What the hell do you mean, he's not dead? Izzy, I saw the Mercedes, the tubing, Sarvaduhka slumped over the wheel . . ." She started to cry. "The police. The funeral—open casket, goddammit! His cousins in mourning."

"Yeah, none of that happens."

She fell on him and started hitting him, little hammer blows against his chest. He let her. He put his arms around her.

"Do you want to sit down now?" he said at last. She nodded. He helped her onto the sofa and sat down beside her. She let him hold her, but she wouldn't look at him.

Tongyu Kargup waved meekly from the orgone box. "I have him on the telephone." He held the phone out toward Fay. "You want to speak?"

Fay shuddered. "Is this some kind of monkey's paw action, Izzy? Because if it is, I'm not opening any doors."

Kargup kept tilting his head left and right and waving the phone at Fay as if to overcome her reticence. "He's just back from Florida. Splashed down on his asteroid. Never even changed his civvies, poor boy."

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Fay's head between his cheek and shoulder, Izzy said to Kargup, *sotto voce,* "Tell him to get his ass over here." Kargup nodded, saluted, and started to whisper into the phone.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. No one moved. The knob turned, and Sarvaduhka shouldered through. He was wearing a new polyester short-sleeve in blues and greens as bright as a spit-slicked sourball. It had palm trees on it against a searing yellow sun. His legs looked shrink-wrapped in the old pants, however, and the shoes seemed somehow to have melted; they had an oddly orthopedic look. His face was blistered and covered with patches of white cream. He shambled in, slammed the door behind him, and then leaned back against it. "You have no idea."

Izzy smiled. "Guess again."

"I died!" Sarvaduhka gasped. "I have had an after death experience. I was sitting in my squareback, feeling very sad, Fay, very, very sad, Izzy. Your Holiness, I was so very, very sad! Then I was so sleepy and heavy.

"And then I saw it. Death. The afterlife. It is like a gigantic explosion out of the flesh. It is as if one had been lifted off the earth and propelled into space." He trembled, transfixed, as he stared up into the Sears and Roebuck ceiling fixture, a frosted square of glass, slightly rounded, with vaguely flower-like etchings and the shadows of dead spiders and flies and bits of cobweb. "I saw God."

Tongyu Kargup tittered.

"I . . . saw . . . God. He was like an immense sea that enveloped me and buoyed me, returning me from the death state."

Izzy nodded. "That wasn't God, Duke. That *was* an immense sea that enveloped you and buoyed you, returning you from the death state. That was the Gulf of Mexico. The angels you're about to tell us about were tourists out fishing for marlin, and the conveyance by which you reached us again was a Trailways friggin' bus."

He turned to wag a finger at Kargup. "That was some dumb idea, Your Holiness, shipping our man off to Florida for R&R amongst the marlin. I coulda told you he'd get seasick and wind up in the drink."

"Excellent!" laughed Tongyu Kargup. "I didn't, and then I did, and then I always had! Oh, you Izzy! Look! Here is the brochure for the fishing boat!" He pulled it from the inside vest pocket of his seersucker business suit; sealed packets of salt and pepper tumbled out as he did so—"Air-India" they said, with pictures of the single engine Puss Moth that started the Air-India line. "It wasn't there, and then it was, and then it always had been, oh you Izzy!"

Fay yanked the brochure out of Kargup's hand, then staggered toward Sarvaduhka, stopping a mere inch or two from him. She felt his breath against her face. She touched his arm—and gasped. "I saw you in the casket."

Izzy shook his head. "Not any more, you didn't."

Fay spun to face him. "I saw it. I mean, I saw *him.* I mean . . . ." She sat down on the sofa like a dollop of sour cream falling from the ladle.

"Ouch!" Sarvaduhka jumped away from the door. Fay's mother's tabletop had just tumbled onto his foot. The springs connected to the retractable leaves shuddered and boinged as the thing clattered to the floor. The ice covering it shattered and flew up.

They all stared at one another for a moment. Izzy broke the silence. "There's a stroke of luck, Fay," he fluted. "You were looking for that, weren't you?"

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"Ah, what a great piece of ass is this whole unfathomable world," sang Tongyu Kargup. He flew from the orgone box to the fallen tabletop. He scooped up a handful of shattered ice and tossed it into the air. "In us and out of us she bumps and grinds. Every tongue flutter makes me come, every glint and darkling. Look at that dustball in the corner there where a crack in the mopboard pinches it—don't call it ugly or beautiful or dull. Don't call it anything at all. Unfathomable! Just hump it, Sarvaduhka tulku. Hump it steaming bright jissom through every pore and letting it impregnate you with dustball sentience. Life is one long copulation, mister." He shot a querulous glance at Izzy. ". . . right?"

"Right, right," said Izzy.

Fay groaned.

"It won't be long, Fay, I promise," Izzy whispered, "till everything's back to normal. Let's fold, huh?" He retrieved a sheet from the floor where it lay and presented a bunch of it to Fay.

She rose. She folded.

Tra la.

Yawning and blinking, Inana shuffled in from the bedroom, her arms thrown back like a kindergartner pretending to be a tree. She saw Sarvaduhka at the door and cocked her head. "Don't I know you?"

"I don't think so," he said, "but I've just seen God. All sorts of things are possible."

She nodded sleepily, then shook her head as if the sleepiness were water and she could shake it off like a wet dog. "I just had the wildest dream."

Time heals all wounds—ask Izzy—one way or another. With the internal dynamics of the sun—and of Vega—momentarily in equilibrium and with the Hale-Bopp coursing at a safe and pretty distance, Sarvaduhka found a girlfriend, not Inana (and how foolish he felt to have so glorified that ancient dalliance) but a real girl of India.

Cousins Max and Vishnu had gotten together and arranged it. Vishnu had had a frightening dream about his cousin Jai in which he lay in state after committing suicide—open casket, white his shroud as the mountain snow, the whole nine yards, yaar, everything, and he knew it was time for an intervention. Luckily, Max knew just the female, old fashioned, very young, nubile, glad to have a ticket to America, ready to fall in love forever, a Hindi love movie addict in fact, and a former Kathak dancing school girl.

Gauzy skirts, bangles, downcast eyes, wah, wah! Perfect.

How grateful Sarvaduhka was!

Never mind that she started reading *The Feminine Mystique* two weeks after her arrival and by the end of the third was wearing slacks in public. Sarvaduhka had female action—and he had seen the face of God. That had been just as the sutras described it, in fact: "You will be like one who has had a dream and who lacks the words with which to talk about it." He tried, though. He told his dark-eyed fiancée about it over and over in bed while she nodded and turned the dog-eared pages of her second-hand Betty Friedan. Often he fell asleep, with his head in her bosom and his arms around her waist, to the sound of the turning pages, or she, shutting her paperback on a bookmark that was actually a folio card from the Lucky Three, would embrace her dear Jai, male pig though he was, and nuzzle and sigh and flutter her eyes in the deva realm of his loving embrace. ○

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

TALES FROM EARTHSEA
by Ursula K. Le Guin
Harcourt, $ 24.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-15-100561-3

Le Guin's four previous Earthsea novels—a series that began with young readers in mind, but ended with a book very much aimed at adults—are one of the modern landmarks of the fantasy field. Now, with a new Earthsea novel in the works, Le Guin has collected five shorter stories set in that universe, all of them written since the appearance of *Tehanu,* which the author originally thought was going to end the series. While revivals of a popular series often disappoint its original fans, these stories are likely to have the opposite effect.

Earthsea is a world where humans live on a large archipelago in a world-wide ocean. The ability to wield magical power is a common, if not universal, gift among humans of the islands—and among the dragons who occasionally raid them. The first three books concerned Ged, a student and later a master at the magical academy on the isolated island of Roke. The doors of the institution are closed to women, who must find their own magical abilities without the help of the master wizards. That discrepancy became a significant theme in *Tehanu*, and returns to the focus in the final story of this volume.

Le Guin's story-telling voice is perhaps most clearly marked by her constant awareness of the things of everyday life. Earthsea is a world where wizards keep chickens, and gather the eggs; where time is measured by the flowering of trees, and where country people have names like Otter, Silence, or Dragonfly. The simple surface of her stories grounds them in a firm reality that for most of us modern-day town-dwellers is already exotic—yet at the same time commonplace and calming. Then, when the real magic breaks loose, the impact is all the greater.

The stories here are presented in order of internal chronology. The earliest, and longest tale, is "The Finder," which takes place three centuries before the first of the novels; the latest, "Dragonfly," after the end of *Tehanu*. The book concludes with a brief but useful "Description of Earthsea," detailing the peoples of the islands, and their languages and cultures.

While all the stories are worth the price of admission, I was most impressed by "The Finder." The greater length allows Le Guin to build the world more fully here; the story benefits as well from its plot, the tale of a young wizard coming into his full powers. "The Finder" lays the groundwork for readers who may not remember all the lore of Earthsea—although the story takes place at a point when much of the traditional lore has yet to be established.

The fourth story in the book, "On the High Marsh," is a look at Ged, the protagonist of the original Earthsea books. Here he comes into a backward village and takes on an unglamorous but necessary task, exemplifying the spirit of subordination of self to community that runs through much of Le Guin's work. The final tale, "Dragonfly," follows a young woman who is brought to Roke by a young wizard intent on a

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prank—that has consequences far beyond what he has foreseen. The author describes the story as a bridge to the next novel. This information will whet the reader's already well-honed appetite. While you're waiting, these stories ought to keep you happy.

SHIP OF FOOLS
by Richard Paul Russo
Ace, $12.95 (tp)
ISBN: 0-441-00798-8

Russo is probably best known for his "Carlucci" series—noir SF detective stories in a near-future San Francisco. This one's a change of pace, a far-future SF novel set on a generation starship, the *Argonos*.

Not surprisingly, Russo's interest in the grittier side of society remains at the center of his vision here. The starship is as big as a good-sized city, with its share of malcontents who have long since lost any say in the larger issues that face the shipboard society. Much of the plot involves tensions between diverse elements of the starship's power structure, in particular Nikos, the autocratic captain (whose lieutenant, Bartolomeo Aguilera, is the novel's narrator) and an extremely powerful—and largely corrupt—church. Unsure whether he wants to cast his lot with any of the factions, Aguilera is finally forced to act by a series of life-and-death decisions that concern the entire ship's company.

The crisis arises with the discovery of a formerly inhabited planet. Not having made a planetfall in fourteen years, the ship is desperate for certain vital supplies. But the planetfall ends in horror when the supply party (including Aguilera and Father Veronica, a priest who has befriended him) finds evidence that the inhabitants have been systematically tortured and murdered. The ship's officers, spooked by the discovery, make an unusually quick departure. This sets off an attempted rebellion among the passengers, many of whom are fed up with shipboard life and wish to be put ashore on the planet. The officers quash the rebellion and throw the ringleaders—including Aguilera—in prison.

His imprisonment lasts nearly a year, in almost solitary confinement, until a new crisis arises. The ship discovers an enormous derelict spaceship, and in the process of exploring it several crew members are killed by what appear to be booby traps. With a difficult decision facing the ship, Aguilera is released from prison to help the captain decide what action to take: continue the exploration or leave the enigmatic derelict behind. As it turns out, they have fewer choices than they think.

As in the Carlucci books, Russo uses the extremes of human experience to explore central moral issues. The result is a strong novel by a writer who has been doing fine work for years. Russo is overdue for a breakout book; maybe *Ship of Fools* will give him the larger audience his work certainly deserves.

THE SECRET OF LIFE
by Paul McAuley
Tor, $25.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-765-30080-X

Biotechnology is the key science in this near-future thriller. A Martian organism is accidentally released in the Pacific ocean. Soon the slick (as the rapidly growing organism is known) begins to threaten the entire ocean biome. Its threat is made more dangerous by its ability to evolve defenses to the various poisons arrayed against it. No longer able to keep the menace secret, the U.S. government decides to send a team of scientists to Mars to verify its origin and seek a means of containing it.

Mariella Anders, an expatriate Scottish biologist, has been waiting half her professional life for this op-

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portunity. A maverick who refuses to play along with the corporate entities who rule Big Science in the 2020s, she almost immediately butts heads with Penn Brown, a scientific power broker in the employ of Cytex, a biotech multinational. At the same time, radical Greens attempt to recruit her to their cause. Committed to finding out the truth, Mariella refuses to sign on with either side—until Brown traps her into a security breach, then faces her with a choice between signing a Cytex contract or being bumped from the mission. Not wanting to miss the chance at Mars, she signs.

The middle third of the book takes place on Mars, where Mariella is part of a mission to the North Pole. After a series of violent episodes, she returns to Earth on a hijacked Chinese space ship, bringing samples of the Martian organism to a Green underground base in Mexico, whence she will lay the groundwork for breaking the government/Cytex stranglehold on the knowledge inherent in the organism's genome.

McAuley manages very effectively to interlace a hard-SF surface with a romantic anti-establishment viewpoint. Mariella is an appealing protagonist, who combines a burning commitment to the truth with a refusal to play by others' rules. The ride is so much fun that it seems almost a shame to note that most of what we see of earthside society could have just as easily been set in the 1970s—dope-smoking back-to-the landers, uptight corporate baddies, ruthless third-world guerrillas, and so forth. There are a few surprises, but this is at bottom a very clear-cut good-guys/bad-guys story—and there's not a lot of question who the good guys are. Throughout the novel I could figure out who was on the right side by looking at their taste in clothes or music. Mariella likes old-time country blues. . . .

On the other hand, McAuley has a better eye for American culture (both official and underground) than many of his British compatriots, and the scenes on Mars are convincing and well-paced. A solid SF adventure, with enough cutting-edge science to raise it above the pack, and an engaging protagonist.

MANIFOLD SPACE
by Stephen Baxter
Del Rey, $24.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-345-43077-8

Baxter takes Reid Malenfant, the lead character of last year's *Manifold Time,* and throws him into a different universe for an adventure that takes him to far worlds and confronts a major threat to the continuation of human life. In other words, this is galaxy-rocking, sweeping adventure, with the fate of the entire human race at stake, and plenty of scientific wonders to anchor the entire structure to reality.

The ride begins with the discovery that some entity is at work in the farther reaches of the solar system, strip-mining the resources of the outer worlds. The predictable human reaction has to be reined in by the fact that nothing we can do is likely to affect the poachers, dubbed *Gaijin* by Nemoto, the Japanese astronomer who first detects their presence. But worse is to come, with the discovery that the Gaijin are only the first wave of invaders—and that the successive waves plan to bring about the total destruction of the sun.

This sets off a long-term struggle to find what can be done to save the human race. An astronaut nearing the end of his career, Malenfant travels to the edge of the solar system, where he discovers a gateway connecting him to the Gaijin's previous home system. This begins an odyssey across the galaxy, visiting system after system to see the damage wrought by the aliens. He returns to Earth at

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increasingly long intervals, taking other human observers with him, and using the time dilation effect of relativistic travel to extend his life beyond all expectations.

Meanwhile, on the Moon, Nemoto has begun her own secretive research program, looking for a way to avoid the apparently inevitable. It is already clear that even the Gaijin are so far beyond our technical capabilities that opposing them is futile. But that doesn't stop Nemoto—or Baxter, who has clearly inherited the super-science mantle of his Golden Age forebears.

The climactic scenes are effectively built up, the saving coup is convincing, and there are plenty of far-out wonders along the way, from the terraforming of the moon to the evacuation of Earth. The ending is as exciting as anything in Doc Smith. If you thought they didn't write that kind of stuff anymore, here it is—updated and as much fun as ever.

WHAT IF OUR WORLD IS THEIR HEAVEN? The Final Conversations of Philip K. Dick
edited by Gwen Lee and Doris Elain Sauter
Overlook, $26.95 (hc)
ISBN: 1-58567-009-X

The cult of the late Philip K. Dick persists in this rambling collection of interviews taped a short while before his death. Whatever your opinion of Dick and his work, you'll find something here to confirm it—and, likely as not, something else to challenge it.

The interviews took place in early 1982. Dick was bathing in the glow of the imminent release of *Blade Runner,* the film version of his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Not surprisingly, the film (which Dick had not seen in its entirety) and the book serve as one focus of their discussion. The other focus was his forthcoming last novel, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer,* a "mainstream" work based in part on maverick Episcopal bishop James Pike, a friend and spiritual mentor of Dick.

Dick's thoughts on these subjects—and various others—are transcribed pretty much verbatim from the tapes, with a bare minimum of editing. What is immediately evident is that Dick was not so much a conversationalist as a monologist; the interviewer often gets only a word or two in edgewise before Dick is off on another page-long riff on whatever subject has caught his interest. The results are both fascinating and frustrating. As Larry Niven once observed in the course of an interview, talking is always first draft. And Dick is definitely winging it here.

What comes through first and foremost is his enthusiasm about almost everything that comes to his attention. Not just the film, or the new book—anyone not half dead would be expected to show considerable enthusiasm about those. But Dick goes on at length about religion, music, writing, cognac, ex-wives, the publishing industry, mysticism—making connections at blazing speed. At one point, he outlines the book he's thinking about writing next—one that combined his fascination with music with the transplant of an alien mind (from a race unable to hear sound) into a human being's brain. Reading his description, one wishes he'd gotten the chance.

Although it might be unthinkable to make editorial changes in Dick's comments, the book could use a few footnotes on Dick's numerous references and allusions. These are frequent: some learned (to Josquin Deprez or Leucippus), others to people and events in the author's own biography that few of us are likely to get. Nor should the editor have been afraid to correct Dick's occasional factual errors (for example, his almost-right description of a Golden rectangle). Dick may have been

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winging it, but readers should have the benefit of the editor's research.

An extremely interesting portrait of Dick, full of fascinating insights. But it is the work of his admirers, not of objective scholars, and has both the strengths and weaknesses that entails. On balance, this is a book that will most reward fans and scholars of Dick's work; others would be better advised to look at the man's own writings, especially the groundbreaking novels he turned out so prolifically during the 1960s.

THE BOTANY OF DESIRE: A Plant's-Eye View of the World
by Michael Pollan
Random House, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-375-50129-0

The human race has spent a fair amount of its history growing and modifying plants to fit its needs. Surprise: all along, the plants have been encouraging us to meet their needs, as well. Pollan, whose botanical essays have appeared in the New York *Times* magazine, uses apples, tulips, marijuana, and potatoes to show us four different ways the plants have made themselves indispensable to humans. Along the way, an alert reader can get a clear picture of the state of agriculture and botanical science in the modern world.

Pollan gives us the history and lore of the various plants he discusses: for example, the career of Johnny Appleseed, or the Dutch tulip craze of the early eighteenth century. It may surprise many readers that "An apple a day keeps the doctor away" is a relatively modern marketing slogan. Until the rise of the temperance movement at the end of the nineteenth century, most apples grown in this country were destined for conversion into hard cider. (Johnny Appleseed got most of his seeds from the waste dumps of cider mills.) Nor do apple seeds breed true—each seed is a genetic mix, likely to produce fruit different from that of its parent tree. (Commercial varieties are propagated by grafting.) So Johnny Appleseed was not just planting orchards; each of his trees was a genetic wild card, potentially a completely new variety of useful fruit.

A theme that recurs throughout the book is how far modern varieties of these useful plants have diverged from their wild ancestors. The urpotato is a poisonous weed that still grows on the fringes of cultivated fields in the Andes; the Incas, who first domesticated it, raised dozens of varieties tailored to different mini-niches in the mountainous environment. Nowadays, it is difficult to find more than two or three varieties in your local supermarket—and by far, the most widely farmed variety is the Russet Burbank, prized by fast-food chains for its ability to be cut into perfect fries.

But this loss of diversity invites disaster—the Irish potato famine, Pollan observes, was in part the result of the dependence of Irish farmers on a single vulnerable cultivar. Apples, too, are sold in only a few highly profitable varieties, the offspring of lucky genetic accidents that produced unusually tasty fruit. On the other hand, today's tulips are far less dramatically colored than the bulbs that commanded enormous prices at the height of the tulip boom—most of which achieved their exotic flame-like color patterns because of a virus that has been eliminated from the species.

Pollan combines a winning style, a broad range of research, and an eye for the telling detail. This look at the interaction of plant and human reminds the reader that, far from being the master of nature, *Homo sap* remains very much a part of it—despite all our science and technology. We play a role not much more exalted than that of the humble garden bee. Recommended. O

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

You'll have to join the Philadelphia WorldCon (Millennium PhilCon) at the door. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

AUGUST 2001

10–12—**ConVersion**. For info, write: **Box 20098, Calgary Place RPO, Calgary AB T2P 4J2.** Or phone: **(402) 809-2221** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.con-version.org.** Con will be held in: Calgary AB (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Metropolitan Centre. Guests will include: David Drake, Jean-Pierre Normand, Dr. Bill Brooks.

10–12—**ConGlomeration. (502) 491-6344**. Holiday Inn, Clarksville IN. Boris Vallejo, Julie Bell, the Francises.

10–12—**ConChord. www.conchord.org/**. Airtel Plaza, Van Nuys CA. SF/fantasy folksinging.

10–12—**OtaKon. www.otakon.com/.** Convention Center, Baltimore MD. S. Frazier, A. Warren, Poitras. Anime.

11—**Trek Happening.** Broward Community College, So. Campus Library, Pembroke Pines FL. Robin Curtis.

11–12—**Creation Fangoria. (818) 409-0960.** Pasadena (CA) Center. Commercial horror event.

17–19—**Canada National Con. (613) 765-5781.** Chimo Hotel, Ottawa ON. Sawyer, Hartwell, Clink, Czerneda.

17–19—**NecronomiCon.** Marriott, Providence RI. "Lovecraft and the Chtulhu mythos in all its forms."

17–19—**SerenityCon. commandanttb@aol.com.** Ramada Inn, Dayton OH. M. Okrand, R. DeAcetis. Star Trek.

17–19—**Ra-Con. (316) 262-3502. www.ra-con.com/ra-conhome**. Airport Clarion, Wichita KS. John Avett.

17–19—**Dark Shadows.** Marriott, World Trade Center, New York NY. For fans of the TV show.

22–26—**Camp Feral, Box 47008, Mississauga ON L5K 1T9. www.campferal.org.** Minark ON. Anthropomorphics.

22–26—**VolgoCon, c/o Zavgorodny, dom 9, kv 16, ul. Tarashchantsev, Volgograd 400007, Russia. (8442) 739-093.**

23–26—**Mars Society, Box 273, Indian Hills CO 80454. www.marssociety.org/convention.** Stanford (CA) Univ.

24–26—**BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. (505) 266-8905.** Howard Johnson East. S. Zettel, Stirling.

24–26—**MosCon, Box 9622, Moscow ID 83843. lonewolfagq2@hotmail.com.** University Inn. J. Chalker, B. Mott.

24–26—**HorrorFind, 9722 Groffs Mill Rd. #109, Owings Mills MD 21117.** Airport Marriott, Baltimore MD.

24–26—**Animelowa, Box 5303, Coralville IA 52241. www.animelowa.com.** Collins Plaza, Cedar Rapids IA. Anime.

24–26—**Reunion, 3943-E S. Bristol #135, Santa Ana CA 92704. reunioncon.org.** Westin LAX, Los Angeles CA.

24–26—**UniCon, 9 Prospect Terr., Fulford, York YO10 4PT, UK. eboracon@psych.york.ac.uk.** Langwith College.

24–26—**Festival of Fantastic Films, 95 Meadowgate Rd., Salford, Manchester M6 8EN, UK. hnad@globalnet.co.uk.**

24–27—**Harmuni, c/o 119 Whitehill Ln., Gravesend DA12 5LU, UK. harmuni@oreos.org.** Same venue as UniCon.

24–27—**NCC 2001, Box 1701, Kettering NN16 8GQ, UK. www.ncc-cons.co.uk.** Jarvis Picadilly, Manchester UK.

25–26—**Creation, 100 W. Broadway #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409-0960.** Minneapolis MN. Commercial con.

25–26—**Trek Celebration, 11916 W. 109th #125, Overland Park KS 66210. (913) 327-8735.** Washington DC.

30–Sep. 3—**Millennium PhilCon, Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006.** Philadelphia PA. WorldCon. $180+.

31–Sep. 3—**DragonCon, Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. (770) 909-0115.** Hyatt, Atlanta GA. H. Ellison, Daniels.

SEPTEMBER 2001

1–2—**YaoiCon, 2342 Shattuck Av. #267, Berkeley CA 94704. yaoicon@att.net.** Miyako, San Francisco CA. Anime.

1–2—**Creation Farscape, 100 W. Broadway #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409-0960.** Hilton, Burbank CA.

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NEXT ISSUE

OCTOBER/ NOVEMBER DOUBLE ISSUE COVER STORY

We've only ever done three novel serializations in *Asimov's,* but in the October/ November issue we start our fourth serialization, bringing you the first installment (of three) of a new, never-before-published novel by one of the most important and respected writers in science fiction today, **Robert Silverberg.** Called *The Longest Way Home,* it's a novel of extravagant power and emotional depth, compelling, suspenseful, and hard-hitting, as a lost and hunted boy must try to make his way home across the unknown and unexplored expanse of an alien planet of bewildering strangeness and through a gauntlet of hair-raising dangers, and at the same time try to keep a precarious grip on his own identity, as all his certainties and long held beliefs dissolve like sand . . . with an evocative cover by **Fred Gambino.** Don't miss it!

OUR STELLAR CAST FOR OCTOBER/ NOVEMBER

But, exciting as that is, it's not all that we've crammed into this issue for you! Take a look at the *rest* of our stellar cast in this special issue. Critically acclaimed British writer **Simon Ings** makes a brilliant *Asimov's* debut with a tense and fascinating look at a very strange household as he welcomes us into an intricately balanced "Ménage"; **Michael Swanwick** takes us to a colorful, curious, and eccentric future to spin a swashbuckling, slyly entertaining adventure explaining why "The Dog Said Bow-Wow"; one of the giants of the field, **Jack Williamson,** continues his amazing sixty-year-plus career with a suspenseful investigation of a deadly mystery on a distant alien planet, in "Nitrogen Plus"; **Cherry Wilder** returns after too long an absence to act as tour-guide in the evocative "Aotearoa": **William Sanders** returns to give us an unsettling and melancholy vision of what it'll be like "When This World Is All on Fire"; new Scottish writer **Charles Stross** zooms us into a hooked-in, wired-up, dazzlingly fast-paced Information Age future where only the smartest, savviest, and most adaptable of Techno-Geeks can survive and prosper, in "Troubadour"; **Allen M. Steele** lets us read the innermost thoughts of diarists on a raw, unsettled planet, in "Liberty Journals"; **Andy Duncan** lets us in on an obscure historical moment that may or may not have ever happened, when he spins a moving, bittersweet parable of people finding hope in the darkest days of slavery and war, in "Lincoln in Frogmore"; **Robert Reed** paints a vivid and disturbing portrait of "The Boy"; and new writer **Steve Martinez** grapples with a bewildering mystery on a mining outpost deep in space, the unraveling of which will plunge us into a web of conspiracy, racism, intrigue, and fear, and the outcome of which could decide the evolutionary destiny of an entire race, as everyone settles in for a "Bad Asteroid Night."

EXCITING FEATURES

Michael Swanwick opens his correspondence file and gives us a witty and very funny peek at a few decade's worth of "Letters to the Editor"; and **Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column conjures up some "Dead Souls"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our jam-packed October/November special Double Issue on sale at your newsstand on September 11, 2001, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe online, at *www.asimovs.com,* and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you this year! Hey, and although Christmas is past, remember that a gift subscription to *Asimov's* makes a great present any time of the year!

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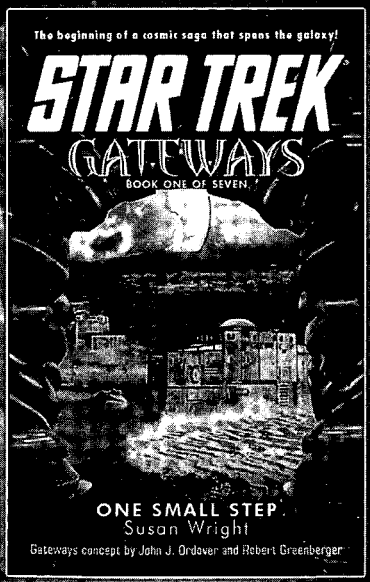
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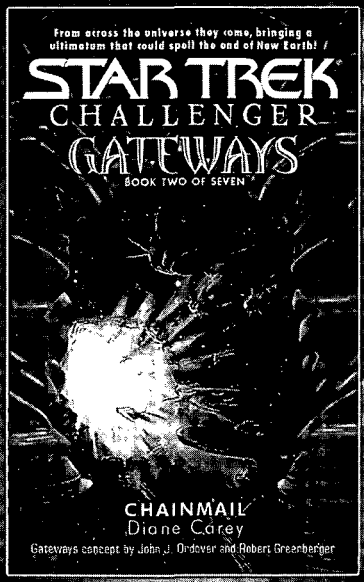
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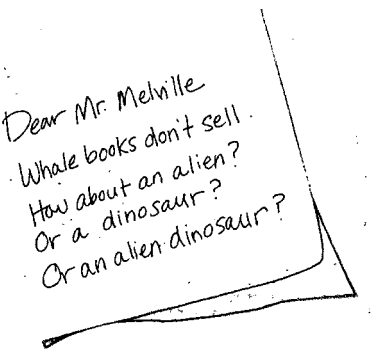
Moby Dick
or
The Whale

by Herman Melville



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